

Assam

# Insurgency and the Disintegration of Civil Society<sup>?</sup>

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This paper proposes to focus more on the ‘decline’ of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and less on either its emergence in 1979 or its development through the 1980s. While I have had earlier occasion of dealing with ULFA’s emergence and development, I have written almost nothing till date on its much-touted ‘decline’ in the 1990s. The monograph I wrote in 1994 covered the period between 1979 and 1991 and only briefly hinted at some of the very early signs of its disintegration.<sup>1</sup> My otherwise longish essay on ULFA written for a Bengali journal in 1999 was not only published much later but also meant for a

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<sup>?</sup> An earlier draft of this paper was presented to the Seminar on ‘National Security Issues: Special Emphasis on Northeastern India’ organized by the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development in Guwahati, Assam on April 22-4, 2002.

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<sup>1</sup> See, Samir Kumar Das, *ULFA: A Political Analysis*, Delhi: Ajanta, 1994.

limited audience.<sup>2</sup> Although right from the days of the monograph's publication, many scholars – both from India and abroad, have joined issue with me, I have not felt sufficiently provoked to respond to them. My Bengali essay sought to put across the argument that ULFA has brought to the fore a unique political critique, which its adversaries will find difficult to simply wish away or for that matter, wipe out by force and coercion. If ULFA *appears to have* deserted the critique (or the 'cause') it had produced and so fervently brought to the fore over the years, its adversaries have squarely to be blamed for making it desert what once was so dear to it. As the critique deserts itself, ULFA does not make itself felt any longer through the power of a discourse. It is thus *forced* to clutch on to various non-discursive forms of power. The political critique *per se* has not lost its validity. It has only outlived one of its most powerful agents.

In many ways, this paper is a continuation of the same argument. But it marks a departure on at least two counts: First, my earlier paper took a romantic view of the political critique or the discourse that ULFA produced and brought to the fore. The critique in question is not something that can be deserted and left in the cold in this manner or, for that matter, be subsequently reactivated and represented by any other political force at its own sweet will. The critique does not so much require the mediation of an agent to articulate it, but very much a conjunction of forces within which it gains its currency. The conjunction of forces gives it a site where it articulates and circulates itself – a site where the terms of the critique are debated, exchanged and transacted – in short, acquire its meanings and thereby produces and reproduces itself. We describe this site as a discourse. This paper, in short, proposes to move away from an agent-centric view of the critique to a view that focuses on what Foucault calls, 'the relations peculiar to a discourse'.<sup>3</sup> The agent-centric view only indulges in

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<sup>2</sup> Samir Kumar Das, Samprotik Asom: Prasanga Sanjukta Mukti Bahini' (Contemporary Assam: The Context of United Liberation Front of Assam), (in Assamese) in *Samaj Sameeksha*, 11(1-2), January 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in Josue V Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Modernist Criticism*, London: Methuen, 1980, p. 157.

what I prefer to call 'a blame game'. My Bengali essay was not altogether free from this game.

Analyses on ULFA today seem to have approached a blind alley within this context: On the one hand, commentators like, Jaideep Saikia accuse ULFA of having provoked the government into 'a counter-insurgent over-reaction'. As he argues:

Counter-insurgency measures by the state are mostly stimulus responses. This is true primarily for the State of Assam where counter-insurgency operation has largely been limited to a military option... Very few cases have been recorded whereby the government forces... have taken a proactive role in order to neutralize ULFA.<sup>4</sup>

Referring to the extraordinarily high and rising level of political violence in the State, Harin Mahanta, on the other hand argues, "the government that has decided to answer the (voice of) reason only through gun has given birth to terrorism."<sup>5</sup> Even as late as in 1998, Mukul Mahanta argues that if 'muscle power has gained in importance' it is the Indian army that has 'taught' it.<sup>6</sup> In other words, if ULFA has turned 'terrorist' it is the government that has pushed it in this direction. The problem with the agent-centric view of discourse is that it has the inherent tendency of finding fault with either of the adversaries involved in a conflict situation.

Second, the irony is that there is nobody to celebrate the 'decline' of ULFA. This degeneration does not give the ULFA's adversaries any reason whatsoever to celebrate. Even a very rough estimate made by official agencies suggests that more than 500 security force personnel lost their lives in course of their encounters with the militants in Assam during the 1990s. Moreover, the people by now have become used to the huge presence of security forces – especially troops all over the State. As Wasbir Hussain observes:

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<sup>4</sup> Jaideep Saikia, "Revolutionary or Warlord: The ULFA's Organisation Profile", *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, New Delhi, vol. 9, July 2001, pp. 111-2.

<sup>5</sup> Harin Mahanta, *Ainar Sasan Aru Prahasan* (The Rule of Law or Mockery?), (in Assamese), Guwahati: Janaki Prakashan, 1994, p. 69, trans. mine.

<sup>6</sup> Mukul Mahanta, 'ULFAi Etiya Ki Kara Ucit' (What Should ULFA Do Now?), (in Assamese) in *Natum Padatik*, 1(3), December 1998, p.84.

Today, the Army has lost its psychological edge due to its prolonged use in internal security duties, because the people see the troops everywhere, in the towns and cities, guarding bridges on the national highways, patrolling rivers, checking vehicles and so on.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the country's top policemen, with enviable records of successfully handling insurgencies – whether in the northeast or in the northwest (e.g. Punjab and Kashmir) – are also aware of the limits of counter-insurgency operations. As a scholar argues in a somewhat general vein: "... there is a latent awareness in many of those directly engaged in fighting terrorism that state violence has its limits and by itself cannot solve the problem of terrorism."<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, what is trumpeted as widespread public disenchantment with ULFA also involves many complexities. It is true that there have been reports of ULFA cadres being beaten and subsequently turned over to the security forces by villagers in upper Assam. Examples of a cross-section of people taking out processions against alleged 'ULFA atrocities' are by no means rare. But ULFA's loss of public sympathy does not seem to signify any gain for the Indian state. As Udayon Misra observes:

The excesses committed by the State alienated it further from the people and its moral authority was severely eroded. The collapse of the moral authority of the State actually helped the proponents of *Swadhin Asom*.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, though there may have been a noticeable decline in public sympathy for ULFA's recent activities, people by and large seem to be against any kind of 'stern' action being taken against them. *Prantik* – an Assamese biweekly, had conducted an opinion poll amongst its readers drawn from as many as 19 districts of Assam and parts of Arunachal Pradesh on the eve of the Legislative Assembly elections in May 2001. The respondents,

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<sup>7</sup> Wasbir Hussain, "Multi-Force Operations in Counter-Terrorism: A View from the Assam Theatre," *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, New Delhi, vol. 9, July 2001, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Ashis Nandy, "Terrorism Indian-Style: The Birth of a Political Issue in a Populist Democracy" in Subrata Mitra and James Chiriyakandath, eds., *Electoral Politics in India: A Changing Landscape*, New Delhi: Segment Books, 1992, p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*, Simla: IIAS, 2000, p. 137.

among the many other segments of the reading public covered by the Survey, included a disproportionately large section of middle-class professionals. While 60 percent of respondents believed that 'terrorism of the militants' would be an issue in the then approaching elections in Assam, only six percent actually asked for 'stern measures' against them.<sup>10</sup> In the writings of such analysts as Jaideep Saikia, the fact of erosion of public sympathy is blown out of proportions, often at the expense of ignoring this dilemma that characterizes the public psyche in contemporary Assam. My Bengali essay indicated, but paid only inadequate attention to, this dilemma.

This dilemma to my mind is extremely significant: First of all, its presence demonstrates that the critique implicit in ULFA's theoretical and political practice is still not dead or fully destroyed. What I call the critique is, according to Jaideep Saikia, 'adequate for the purpose of examining the genesis of the (ULFA) movement'.<sup>11</sup> If one assumes now that ULFA 'began to careen out of control', does this necessarily mean that the critique has lost its adequacy? The fact that an organization has supposedly deserted the 'cause' that it had once so steadfastly upheld and brought to the fore does not imply that the 'cause' has been realized or rejected, or that it has, consequently, lost all its relevance for the society. Further, the ULFA's course of development and decline also points to the continuing necessity of nurturing and developing the critique through such social and political institutions that are essential for the development of the cause, and certainly not through the kind of violence that the insurgents and counter-insurgents are found to have unleashed and perpetrated against each other. The ensemble of institutions that helps the critique and the discourse enveloping it is called 'civil society'. It is at this point that we choose to pitch in our plea for a vibrant civil society in Assam. Unfortunately, the decline of ULFA has also been accompanied by a certain disintegration of civil society institutions in Assam.

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<sup>10</sup> Jatindra Nath Talukdar, 'Janmat: Prak Nirbachani Sameekshar Falafal' (Public Opinion: The Results of an Electoral Survey), (in Assamese) in *Prantik*, vol. 20, no. 8, March 16-31, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Jaideep Saikia, 'Situational Stimuli: State-Sponsored Response to Terror' (*mimeo*, 2001)

Accordingly, this paper is divided into three rather unequal parts: In the first part, we propose to examine the reported decline of ULFA. The second part takes us back to what we describe as ULFA's critique, and it seeks to draw attention to some of the questions posed by the critique relating to nationalism in Assam that are considered crucial, but that nevertheless seem to remain unresolved. The third part takes note of the factors that are responsible for the disintegration of civil society institutions in Assam.

## ULFA's Decline

The decline of the ULFA has received some – though very sketchy attention in scholarly circles. Its decline first of all refers to its growing inability to pursue the 'cause' that once formed part of its revolutionary political agenda. According to Udayon Misra, ULFA was never conceived as an organization capable of pursuing a revolutionary agenda: "... right from the beginning the ULFA was organized as a militaristic organization where the political wing occupied a subsidiary status."<sup>12</sup> It is well known that a five-member team consisting of Golap Baruah (General Secretary), Robin Neog (Chief Instructor), Kalpajyoti Neog (Foreign Secretary), Siddhartha Phukan (Convenor, Publicity Cell) and Sobhan Saikia (Member) signed a 'Letter of Intent' (*Pratiruti Patra*) on January 12, 1992, as a step towards holding talks with the Government of India. They promised (i) to have accepted the Constitution of India; (ii) expressed their willingness to solve all their demands within the Constitution of India; and (iii) to abandon the violent path by surrendering arms at their disposal. In exchange, they requested the Government to (a) stop military operations and arresting its cadres; (b) withdraw the Armed Forces Special Powers Act and also the ban slapped on ULFA; (c) expedite the proceedings against all those who were held in police custody; (d) free all supporters and sympathizers of ULFA who had committed no 'serious offence'; (e) free its members who were still in prisons.<sup>13</sup> Paresh Baruah – ULFA's

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<sup>12</sup> Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, p.139.

<sup>13</sup> *Budhbar*, Guwahati, January 22, 1992.

Commander-in-Chief, immediately scotched the idea by expressing his ‘dissatisfaction’ with ‘the unilateral surrender of arms’ and ‘one-sided acquiescence to the Constitution of India’.<sup>14</sup> The domination of the military wing over the political wing was also responsible for the erosion of what Udayon Misra calls, ‘inner-party democracy’.<sup>15</sup> Way back in September 1990, Sanat Duara, one of ULFA’s sergeants who underwent training in Kachin territory, surrendered before the police and admitted that “the individual member at the lower rungs has hardly any right to express his opinions – thanks to ULFA’s very tough rules in this regard.”<sup>16</sup> The more the organization throttles inner-party democracy, the more its revolutionary agenda is subordinated to the interests of a handful of self-seeking leaders. The violence it takes resort to is often deployed in order to settle ‘personal scores’:

The fight of United Liberation Front of Assam is gradually losing its importance in terms of values and ideologies. In such situations the members of the group exploit the situation to settle personal scores.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the funds in ULFA coffers, acquired by whatever means and through whatever justifications, are never subjected to the rigours of financial discipline. Jaideep Saikia has ‘put on record’ the ULFA Budget of 2001-2002 ‘made available to the author by a reliable source’.<sup>18</sup> The problem with his analysis is that he does not seem to recognize that the reliability of the source is not the same as reliability of the information. Moreover, he appears to be privy to sources, which are simply inaccessible to the general scholar, and the information flowing from them remains not only unverified but also unverifiable. Notwithstanding these problems, his otherwise scathing observation that “the lion’s share of the ULFA coffer is being operated without the knowledge of the organization’s cadres”

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<sup>14</sup> See, *Budhbar*, February 12, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, p. 140.

<sup>16</sup> Parag Kumar Das, ‘Ujani Asomat Tras Aru Sankar Anisshit Paribesh’, (The Uncertain Environment of Terror and Anxiety in Upper Assam), (in Assamese) in *Budhbar*, October 10, 1990.

<sup>17</sup> Anuradha Dutta, “Women in Conflict Situation: A Case Study of Assam” (*mimeo.* 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Saikia, “Revolutionary or Warlord”, pp. 121-2.

may contain some truth.<sup>19</sup> This is reflected in the reportedly lavish life-styles of ULFA's top leadership, so much so that they have already earned the disrepute of being 'silver-screen' rebels.<sup>20</sup> In sum, one finds that the top leadership has been successful in monopolizing its control, both over arms and finance, the two key resources of an insurgent organization.

ULFA's organizational metamorphosis has been responsible not only for its reported digression from the revolutionary agenda but also what is termed, mostly in journalistic circles, as its 'terrorist' transformation. In other words, its public activities appear only to be a reflection of its deeper organizational decay. All the contemporary writings on the decline of the ULFA appear to be centred on what I call an *inside-out narrative*. The malady that afflicts its organization also has its ramifications for the politics it initiates or is involved in. There are at least three major trends that are highly visible in ULFA's politics through the 1990s. One, insofar as military and financial power becomes concentrated in the hands of a few leaders, the organization starts closing in increasingly on itself, alienating, in the process, the public support and sympathy that it had hitherto enjoyed. The argument is that ULFA never took any active measures to boost its public image and whatever support and sympathy it enjoyed were conferred on it by the general public (*raij*) more out of their own disenchantment with the prevailing political system than out of any affirmation of its politics. The public, the argument goes, read their disenchantment into its politics. While a good deal of such support and sympathy came from a widespread sense of disenchantment that had gripped the society in Assam, there were, nevertheless, some very significant and positive initiatives on ULFA's part to reach out to the masses, not only to communicate what they intended to accomplish, but also to receive precious feedback from the public. The problem with the inside-out

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 123; See also, Jaideep Saikia, *Contours*, Guwahati: Sagittarius, 2001, pp. 32-34.

<sup>20</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika for example observes: "The Assamese widened the description of guerrilla warfare in the region: from jungle camps and an uncertain income from villages – in the form of taxes levied by the Nagas and Mizos – the rebel movements soared to the five-star culture". See, Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*, New Delhi: Viking, 1994, p. 175.



narrative is that it does not take note of these initiatives: First of all, there is reason to believe that even in the early 1990s, ULFA took notice of the public criticisms levelled against it, and felt it necessary to respond to them. *Budhbar* would carry a column on public opinion (*janmat*) through which the Publicity Secretary of ULFA was in regular correspondence with the reading public. Secondly, the nature of the activities undertaken by the *Jatiya Unnayan Bahini* – believed to be one of ULFA’s over-ground organizations, may also be mentioned in this connection. These activities were geared more to the objective of being in constant touch with the people at large and making them self-reliant, so much so that they would develop the capacity to reject the dependency on the state in undertaking development projects to address their own grievances. As a member of its Central Publicity Cell in one of the interviews pointed out:

We do not think that we can give some relief by constructing a road here or a school there. We do it in order to associate the people with all activities and with the objective of making them actively participate (in them) so that they become aware of their power and capability. We do these activities in order to awaken (in us) the feeling that we can be self-reliant. The enthusiastic participation of the people for establishing socialism is absolutely necessary. Everybody will have to work for the construction of the future society.<sup>21</sup>

Last but not the least, ULFA’s attempts since the middle of 1992 at reorganizing the district committees and unplugging them from the hitherto firm and tightening grip of the central headquarters, may also be regarded as an initiative in reaching out to the people. According to Sanjib Baruah, these attempts did not, of course, bear any instant fruit and “a battle is on today for the hearts and minds of the people.”<sup>22</sup> To remain oblivious to these

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<sup>21</sup> ‘ULFA-r Sathe Kichhu Katha’, (Some Conversations with ULFA), (in Bengali) in Amit Ray, ed., *Communist Chintay Bharate Jati Prasna*, Calcutta: Radical Impression, 1991, p. 74, trans. mine.

<sup>22</sup> Sanjib Baruah, “The State and Separatist Militancy in Assam: Winning a Battle and Losing a War?” in *Asian Survey*, Berkeley, vol. 34 no. 10, October 1994, p. 876.

developments, however, betrays a one-sided and incomplete reading of ULFA's organizational history.

Secondly, ULFA's reportedly indiscriminate and random use of violence has been a subject of frequent scholarly discussion and is believed to be responsible for its allegedly 'terrorist' transformation. Terrorist violence, according to Hiren Gohain, cannot be the 'essence' of revolution. For it has the tendency of creating anarchy and chaos, which unless coordinated and directed to "the objective of freedom from economic exploitation and oppression" will only make people feel "incompetent and powerless."<sup>23</sup> While 'purposelessness' has been one of the most spectacular characteristics of ULFA's resort to violence, it has largely been accused of having brought in what is often described as a 'gun culture' into Assam. It is true that ULFA has taken great pains to absolve itself of any responsibility for the massacre of Hindi-speaking civilians in upper Assam in late-2000, but the organisation continues to be blamed for these excesses. We do not have any independent means of verifying the actual facts, but what is interesting to note in this connection is that, if we assume that ULFA has a hand in masterminding and organizing these killings, then they also show the inherent limits of such violence – in the inability to publicly own up to them and to back them with any kind of discursive justification acceptable to others. This had never been the case in ULFA's earlier history. In other words, the recent spate of violence allegedly masterminded and organised by ULFA, has also robbed it of the intellectual means of justification. 'Terrorist' transformation imposes limits on the organisation's attempts at couching its political practice within the terms of its discourse.

Thirdly, and as a corollary to the second, we know that the operations of a revolutionary organization are necessarily subordinate to its ideological requirements. Its terrorist transformation, on the other hand, turns the table around by subordinating ideological considerations to operational requirements. The plea for constantly learning from practice, and thereby continuously enriching the theory one subscribes to, is not

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<sup>23</sup> Hiren Gohain, *Bandorar Kaal* (The Time of the Ports), (in Assamese), Guwahati: Bani Gohain, 1987, p. 229.

the same as subordinating theory to the requirements of practice. The concept of 'theoretical practice' is intended to take care of the complex interplay between theory and practice.

ULFA is explicitly accused of having subordinated its ideology to what Jaideep Saikia calls, 'operational requirements'. Thus, the shift in its stance on the question of immigrants from Bangladesh in 1992 is explained in terms of the organisation's need to secure safe hideouts in a foreign country at a time when the Indian security forces have successfully turned the pressure on it. In an otherwise long pamphlet entitled 'Asombasi Purbabangeeya Janagoshtiloi ULFAr Ahvan' (ULFA's Call to the groups from East Bengal living in Assam), ULFA redefines the concept of 'the Assamese' (*Asomiya*) as "a people of all communities, the mixture of people who are determined to work for all-round progress of Assam". Thus the scope of the concept no longer remains restricted to those who speak Assamese as their mother tongue. Obviously, the immigrants from Bangladesh being the largest group of immigrants are 'an indispensable part' of the revised notion of *Asomiya*.<sup>24</sup> Jaideep Saikia has accused ULFA of having made the turnaround at the instance of its operational requirement of securing a safe haven in Bangladesh, from where it can mastermind and organize all its activities while escaping the Indian security dragnet. The insurgents, Saikia argues, have scant respect for strong Assamese sentiments against the alarmingly high rate of immigration from across the borders threatening their language and culture. Thus, in Saikia's words, the dream of a '*Swadhin Asom*' (Independent Assam) may soon turn into a nightmare of a '*Brihat Bangla*' (Greater Bengal), were ULFA to continue its hobnobbing with external espionage agencies.<sup>25</sup> The advent of terrorism in other words, marks the transformation of ULFA's ideology from an end into a mere means. Nowhere is this sharper than, perhaps, in Subir Ghosh's observation:

A frustrated, cornered insurgent is a dangerous liability for society. He becomes out-and-out a terrorist. He does not care for changing the means to achieve his ends. The

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<sup>24</sup> The pamphlet has been reproduced verbatim in *Budhbar*, June 24, 1992.

<sup>25</sup> Saikia, *Contours*, p. 19.

means are ends in themselves. He does not care what he is supposed to be fighting for. He lives to kill and he kills to live. And he does not care whom he kills and how many he has to kill so that he can live. That has been the tragedy of the ULFA.<sup>26</sup>

ULFA, in short, is now accused of being unfaithful to its ideology almost to the point of forgetting it. The more it invokes the ideology as a means of justifying the apparently senseless and macabre violence that it is often charged with perpetrating – and finds difficult to disown – the more it exposes its political and ideological bankruptcy.

## The Unresolved Questions

As we have argued, ULFA's gradual transformation into a 'terrorist' organization in the 1990s and its growing inability to represent the critique it had once brought to the fore<sup>27</sup> have neither resolved the critique, nor made it redundant. Some of the questions thrown open by the critique remain unresolved till date and what is interesting to note in this connection is that their resolution is still central to the articulation and further elaboration of 'nationalism' in Assam. The alleged decline of ULFA as one of the most powerful representatives of this critique has not reduced – but indeed exacerbated – the necessity of its representation. This section proposes to review only three of these questions underlying ULFA's critique.

First, given that society in Assam is of a composite and multi-ethnic nature, how are the relations between diverse ethnic communities ('nations' and 'nationalities' in ULFA's parlance) to be conducted? At one extreme, there are scholars who assume that cultural assimilation in a society like Assam is an 'objective historical fact' that cannot be altered or, for that matter, reversed at anyone's sweet will, at least in the foreseeable future. Amalendu Guha, for one, argues that the assimilation of different tribal and caste groups and minorities into regional identities and, subsequently, the assimilation of these regional identities into the

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<sup>26</sup> Subir Ghosh, *Frontier Travails: Northeast: The Politics of a Mess*, Delhi: Macmillan, 2001, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> See Das, *ULFA*, Chapter 4.

'Indian great nation' (*Bharatiya Mahajati*) have always been a 'slow' process.<sup>28</sup> Monirul Hussain, too, describes this as an 'irreversible' process. I have elsewhere argued that such a simple and linear narrative of the formation of regional identity and the Indian nation smacks of a highly positivist reading of Assam's society and history.

At the other extreme, there are those who seem to argue that the society in Assam is held together only at the cost of wresting away from the communities, especially the minorities, their respective right to cultural self-determination. There has emerged a whole new literature on how Assamese language and culture came to acquire a dominant position in the otherwise composite Assamese society, so much so that, in many cases, it led to the displacement of the autochthonous tribal languages and cultures. The writings of such scholars as Hiren Gohain, Shivanath Barman, Indibar Deuri and others bear ample testimony to this trend.<sup>29</sup>

It is in the context of this larger debate that ULFA's intervention becomes relevant: On the one hand, its attachment to the territoriality of Assam as it existed on April 7, 1979, that is to say, the day when it actually came into being, is by now well-known. While Assam has been subjected to several consecutive rounds of surgical operations, ULFA is now opposed to any further fragmentation of the State. It takes the territoriality of Assam as it existed on its foundation day as both given and unalterable. Its stiff opposition to the attempts at extending the Naga cease-fire beyond the territorial limits of Nagaland issues from the apprehension that this might serve as a prelude to the formation of 'Greater Nagaland' (*Nagalim*) by including the Naga-inhabited areas of North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong. On the other hand, it considers the question of self-determination of the ethnic communities as only secondary to the question of establishing a '*Swadhin Asom*' by way of liberating her from 'the

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<sup>28</sup> Amalendu Guha, *Asom Namare Aamio Namaro*, (Neither Assam Dies Nor Do I), (in Assamese) Guwahati: Srishtilekha, 1993, p. 54.

<sup>29</sup> Shivanath Barman, 'The Ethnic Agitation in Assam: Exploring the Roots' (2001, *mimeo*). Hiren Gohain, 'Asomiya Madhyabitta Samajar Itihas' (The History of the Assamese middle Class) in *Sahitya Aru Cetana* (in Assamese), Guwahati: Guwahati Book Stall, 1976.

colonialism of New Delhi'. In this perspective, the prevailing ethnic divisions within the society have only prevented her from posing a unified and concerted challenge to such 'colonialism'. Thus, unless the communities that are the victims of this 'internal colonialism' come together and fight a battle against the 'colonial rule', the prospects of their becoming successful in the quest for self-determination are quite bleak. The word 'Unified' in its self-designation focuses on ULFA's realization of the immediate necessity of fighting a unified battle against what it considers to be its enemy.

ULFA seems to make a distinction between the immediate objective of establishing an 'Independent Asom' and the ultimate objective of positioning diverse ethnic communities within it in a manner that will not privilege any one or a particular group of these. But these two objectives are not absolutely separate from each other. The organisation feels the necessity of fighting an internal battle against all such historically followed acts of privileging (the Assamese community), while battling against the external domination of 'colonial New Delhi'. In other words, the nucleus of the future society is formed in the course of the collective struggle. Even ULFA took time to recognise the dangers involved in the thesis of 'de-nationalisation' (*nirjatikaran*) that it once had propounded with much enthusiasm. As late as in 1990, Siddhartha Phukan, ULFA's then Publicity Secretary, strongly advocated 'de-nationalization'. The thesis contains two key elements: one, the variegated ethnic mosaic in the northeast is posing an obstacle to the people's unified struggle against the 'colonialism of New Delhi'. Their ethnic differences are at times so strong that these literally prevent them from coming together and forging a revolutionary unity. The first element reflects ULFA's understanding of the definite historic conjuncture existing at the time when it propounded the thesis. Secondly, and as a corollary to the first, ULFA also believes that it is only 'the economic identity' that is capable of binding the people together, in the sense that the perception of being the victims of the same 'internal colonialism' is likely to prevail over that of variegated ethnic or nationalistic identities. There is reason to believe that, what Phukan calls, 'economic identity' is identical to what, in Classical Marxism, is known as class identity. In

simple terms, ethnic consciousness is dismissed as 'false consciousness.' Phukan for instance, prefers to describe the tea garden people as 'tea labourers' rather than 'tea tribes'. While the latter emphasizes their tribal identity and treats them as a category separate from others – both tribals and non-tribals – ULFA's accent on their identity as 'labourers' should be read as an attempt at placing them under the generic category of 'labourers', irrespective of their ethnic differences. As Phukan observes: "Economic identity should be emphasized more than ethnic identity, tea garden people instead of becoming tea tribes should become tea labourers." If anyone feels that Classical Marxism has been insensitive to the question of ethnicity or nationality, then ULFA will also be accused of the same insensitivity. The whole idea was to make the people conscious of their class identity through a rigorous regime of cultural indoctrination to weld them together in their battle against the common 'enemy'. ULFA viewed itself as a vanguard and, most importantly, as a microcosm in which ethnic differences were deliberately sought to be done away with.

ULFA's thesis of 'de-nationalisation' drew flak both from within the region as well as from without. For one thing, it was accused of being too 'abstract'. It was apprehended that, in the name of obliterating ethnic differences, it would actually promote and patronise the hegemony of the already entrenched ethnic communities. Even if the revolutionary struggle was expected to take on a non-ethnic/nationalistic character, the rhetoric of this struggle could not be internationalist either. ULFA's international overtures were not issued from the imperative necessity of forging a wider class-based unity on an international scale. For another, it was feared that any rapid implementation of this policy would elicit hysteric reactions from the minorities in general and the smaller tribal groups in particular. The United Reservationist Minority Council of Assam (URMCA), for example, argued that the thesis was 'anti-tribal' in character. In short, the question is rather one of evolving appropriate mechanisms for bringing the otherwise heterogeneous population under the banner of a common nationality. The realisation of this necessity led ULFA to revisit its thesis of 'de-nationalization'. By May 1992, the organisation showed signs of decisively moving away from the

thesis. While acknowledging that ULFA had not been successful in obtaining ‘unflinching support’ from all the ethnic communities of Assam – thanks to some ‘wrong policies’ adopted by it – Biplab Hazarika, one of its top ranking leaders, introduced the principle of ‘equal rights and equal dignity’. The only way by which such a principle can be established is to make the communities parts of a common struggle by way of preserving ‘their own language and culture’. An Eleven Point Statement was issued on behalf of ULFA at about the same time, forming the basis of the rejection of its earlier thesis. More negatively stated, this unambiguously denounced any form of ‘hegemonism’ of one community over another. Positively, it pointed out that ULFA “will give recognition to the right to self-determination of all ethnic groups and religious communities on the basis of equal rights and equal dignity in Independent Assam.” This formulation replaced the hitherto prevailing designation of ‘Assamese nationalism’ (*Asomiya jatiyatabad*) by a new one of ‘combined nationalism of all the exploited peoples of Assam’ (*Asomar samuh soshit rajjar sanmilit jatiyatabad*). It called for ‘free self-development’ of each nationality in ‘Independent Assam’.

Next was the question whether ‘internal colonialism’ was the be-all-and-end-all of nationalism in Assam? Contrary to the commonplace belief, ULFA’s objective of putting an end to ‘the colonialism of New Delhi’ is not at all unrelated to the ethnic or nationality question. While branding ULFA as a ‘terrorist’ organization, Walter Laquer for example, observed:

Like other states, the Assam radicals felt neglected by the capital; little patronage came their way, and they established yet another liberation front, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The initiative came from radical elements at the Universities, and ethnic and religious factors have figured very little in the movement, but it is very difficult to clearly distinguish between religious and non-religious motivation among terrorists in Assam and in other parts of India.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Walter Laquer, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, ‘Religion and Terrorism’.



The argument that the politics of ULFA is driven more out of a sense of 'neglect' than out of strong nationalist sentiments implies that the best way to handle this sense of 'neglect' is to undertake and implement appropriate economic reforms and development projects sensitive to the region's specific requirements. I think, the problem with this argument is that it reduces the entire ULFA-phenomenon to a statement of relative deprivation. For ULFA, the sense of 'neglect' is only secondary to its assertion that 'Assam was never a part of India, nor shall she ever be.' What is at issue is not so much the nature of economic neglect that Assam has been subjected to since the beginning of colonial rule way back in 1826, and that continued unabated even after 1947, but very much the *externality* of the rule being established over her. Contrary to what Laquer says, ULFA's intervention has to do more with the autonomy that Assam supposedly enjoyed throughout the greater part of her history, and less with 'neglect'. To collapse the former into the paradigm of economic development is to miss the whole point. ULFA's critique has brought to the fore the question of whether economic development is at all possible in a situation where ethnic or 'national' divisions coincide with the dichotomy between the colonisers and the colonised. Such an argument on ULFA's part has led it to invent the difference, literally to bring it into existence, and to make it a part of its 'social imaginaire'. Parag Kumar Das's *Swadhinatar Prastab* is an interesting text that seems to have been inspired by the single-point agenda of driving home the point that the Assamese have always been *ethnically different* from the rest of India. It is the principle of difference that also articulates them as a separate 'nation' (*jati*). We may note here in passing that Parag Kumar Das was for long associated with *Budhbar* and is often regarded as one of the finest theoreticians of the ULFA, who reportedly fell prey to the bullets of the Surrendered militants of the ULFA (popularly known as SULFA). The Assamese, according to him, are closer to their 'Mongolian brothers', rather than part of the 'Indian socio-cultural ethos'. Das identifies certain anthropological traits of the Assamese and shows how they are different from those of the 'Indians'. Thus, to cite an instance, Sankaradeva was not part of the 'Indian socio-cultural ethos' as he was a fish-eater. While

*Swadhinatar Prastab* is often accused of being ‘simplistic’ and ‘selective’ in drawing our attention to these ‘anthropological traits’, it seeks to celebrate the principle of difference as a means of establishing the community. The allusions to so-called physical and cultural traits – however naive and flimsy they may appear to us – signify their *priority* over the phenomenon of ‘internal colonialism’. They have been ‘colonised’ because they are different. They are not different because they are ‘colonised’. ‘Internal colonialism’ is only an adjunct to the principle of difference. ULFA’s critique, of course, is much broader than a simple political economy critique of the Indian state. It is embedded in the site where the differences between communities are acted upon, interrogated and negotiated on an everyday basis.<sup>31</sup>

Thirdly, ULFA’s critique also draws our attention to one of the fundamental questions of Indian democracy: What if the Constitution itself stifles democracy in a country like India? What if democracy refuses to be bound by the Constitution and oversteps it? Is the Constitution the be-all-and-end-all of our democracy? ULFA’s contribution lies in the fact that it has unsettled the hitherto settled connection between democracy and the Constitution. It shows how, in a multi-ethnic context, the rule of the majority has a tendency of coinciding with that of the dominant ethnicity; and how the ethnic minorities of the ‘far-off areas’ or periphery always stand to lose because of their numerical weakness. The so-called democratic set up cannot but be discriminatory towards the ethnic minorities and insensitive to their particular demands. This discrimination is built into a democratic set up governed by the principle of majority rule – a euphemism for ‘Delhi-ism’ (*Dillibad*). While the ethnic minorities feel closeted within this inherently discriminatory set up, the Constitution does not give them the right to secession. This right would have guaranteed them the right to opt out of it and establish a political system that they would consider to be their own, and in which they would not feel intimidated by the ‘colonial rule’ of the dominant ethnicity. According to ULFA, the

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<sup>31</sup> Parag Kumar Das, *Swadhinatar Prastab*, (The proposal For Independence), (in Assamese), Guwahati: Udangri Prakashan, 1993, pp.18-20.

only way to free oneself from the clutches of this 'colonial rule' is to exercise the right to secession. One notices the distinct influence of the socialist notion of federalism in ULFA's argument. In the former Soviet Union, the right to secession was, at least theoretically, considered to be an integral part of the entire federal set up.

ULFA's argument seems to draw itself from the republican theory of popular sovereignty, according to which people are considered to be sovereign, so much so that the Constitution they craft is taken to be secondary to their will. The Constitution of India too has been 'adopted, enacted and given to themselves' by 'we, the people' and, according to this argument, the people as a sacrosanct body have the right to make and break it. So if, at some point, they consider it necessary to include this right in the Constitution, no democracy can prevent them from doing so. Harin Mahanta raises the same question when he argues:

If the Constitution was written in order to reflect the will of the people after taking oath in the name of the people, then why do many people want to violate it? ... From where did the Constituent Assembly receive the right to take oath in the name of the people? Who is to be blamed for not complying with the Constitution ... the people or the Constitution that has led to the birth of the proposal for Independence (*Swadhinatar Prastaw*)? From where did the Constitution get the right to wrest power from the people? Which dictum of democracy makes the articles obstructing the discussion of people's own will acceptable?<sup>32</sup>

We may recall that ULFA is persistent in making secession one of our Fundamental Rights through a Constitution Amendment Act and stipulates it as one of the preconditions of conducting talks with the Government of India. It is true, also, that its efficacy as an intermediate political institution has been a subject of frequent political debate in the society.

Democracy in India cannot avoid these questions. Our Constitution, as we know, is precariously perched between the

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<sup>32</sup> Harin Mahanta, *Ainar Sasan Aru Prahasan* (The Rule of Law or Mockery), (in Assamese), Guwahati: Jonaki Prakashan, 1994, p. 70.

rival notions of popular sovereignty and Constitutional sovereignty. What will happen if these two notions conflict between themselves? For how long can we afford to postpone our choice?

## **Disintegration**

ULFA's contribution lies in raising these rather unsettling questions, and certainly not in providing any definitive answers to them. Its contribution lies in stirring up our minds rather than in soothing them with any quick fix solutions. Since we are jolted by some questions to which we do not have any easy and definitive answers, the necessity of engaging ourselves in some sort of a collective discourse has become all the more acute.

A collective discourse of this nature is contingent on the development of civil society institutions in a society like Assam. But the problem is that the decline of ULFA has also been accompanied by a certain disintegration of civil society institutions in Assam. Certainly, ULFA alone is not to be blamed for this plight. The purpose of this paper, as we have already said, is not to apportion blame, but to examine the tragic irony that the decline of ULFA has led to in recent years. Although Sanjib Baruah recognises the crucial role played by such organizations as All-Assam Students' Union, Asom Sahitya Sabha and most importantly, ULFA, in articulating and elaborating what he calls, 'Assamese micro-nationalism', he seems to accept this as an unproblematic process. In this section we draw attention to the travails that the processes of articulation and elaboration have been faced with in recent years.

First of all, if civil society is regarded as the space where people explore various 'truth alternatives' and arrive at a consensus about what the truth is, then the cult of violence has resulted in a certain externalisation of 'truth'. In simple terms, it has actually *excised truth* from the civil society agenda by making it dependent on the power of the gun. Truth in such circumstances ceases to be an object of liberation. Deliberation, as the procedural principle of truth, is integral to the writings of Jurgen Habermas, who notes that finding truth is a question of organising

civil society in a manner that will cancel out 'the fallible results'.<sup>33</sup>

When external violence establishes the power of truth, truth ceases to be regarded as truth as soon as violence refuses to back it, and the agency holding it aloft loses its grip over the instruments of violence. This is the opposite of what Foucault describes as 'the regime of truth'. When power is exercised through the 'regime of truth' one is produced, as it were, as its effect and truth becomes internal to one's own self. Thus the self is posited not as the opposite of power but as its very effect.<sup>34</sup> But this is seldom the case when violence becomes external to truth. ULFA's much-reported writ concerning the observance of 'Rangali Bihu' in what it considers to be 'the traditional way' in 1990 serves as a case in point. Similarly directives sent to the Press from time to time regarding its prescribed 'code of conduct' also illustrates the same point. Sanjib Baruah accuses ULFA of being the self-styled 'custodian of Assamese interests on the pattern of more mainstream organisations such as the All-Assam Students' Union and Axom Xatiya Xabha'.<sup>35</sup> When an organisation arrogates to itself the power of determining the culture of a community, it not only contributes to an escalation of violence in society, but also wipes out the other possible alternatives and disciplines, the other possible cultural forms, with a single, pre-defined type. It is, however, at the same time true that such attempts often help in stemming the rot by eliminating those alternatives that, in the name of providing alternatives, are seen to commit excesses.

Secondly, and as a corollary to the above, institutions of civil society depend on the free and unfettered circulation of truth alternatives, and hence militate against any kind of monopolistic closure. The exploration of truth is a public activity, and when people are afraid of harbouring and exploring truth alternatives in

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<sup>33</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, in Ciaron Cronin and Pablo de Greiff, eds., Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998, p. 251.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, trans. by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

<sup>35</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.153.

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full 'public glare', civil society exists only in whispers and the people do not feel safe to publicly express and articulate their opinions.

The tragedy in today's Assam is not so much that ULFA has declined, but very much that, with its decline, the entire edifice of civil society institutions has crumbled as well.