

ULFA

The 'Revolution' comes Full Circle

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The revolution, Pierre Vergniaud remarked, devours her own children.¹ This applies, perhaps, as much to the ideas and ideologies that inspire revolution, as it does to the actors who translate these into the revolutionary engagement.

Such a judgement would, perhaps, hold true for the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the most prominent insurgent outfit in Assam, as well. The organisation that raised a 'revolutionary banner' against the illegal migrants from Bangladesh, and the utter neglect of the people of Assam by the Union government, and sought a solution in creating a *Swadhin Asom* (Independent Assam), now finds shelter in Bangladesh and other foreign locations and issues proclamations lauding the role of the Bangla migrants in the development and culture of Assam. As for efforts to the realisation of the dream of *Swadhin Asom*,

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¹ Pierre Vergniaud, "*Il a été permis de craindre que la Révolution, comme Saturne, dévorât successivement tous ses enfants.*" [There was reason to fear that the Revolution, like Saturn, might devour in turn each one of her children]. Cited in Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire des Girondins*, 1847, Bk. 38, Ch. 20.

these remain confined to select terrorist strikes and rampant extortion. The ULFA has failed as a revolution.

The 'degeneration' of the ULFA has occurred against a background of the overall transformation of Assamese politics as well as society. The ULFA, in its formative years, and in some measure in its current phase as well, drew dividends from a wave of commonly held perspectives and popular ideas. Through the 1980s the organisation set the tone for discourse in the State. Interestingly, this process still continues, albeit in a modified and perhaps perverted form. ULFA's rise was immensely facilitated by circumstances created through the action and inaction of the lawful segments of Assamese society. The ability to dominate the discourse in the State continues to constitute the ULFA's lifeline even today.

The Assam Agitation

The Assam Agitation that rocked the State on the issue of detection, deletion and deportation of the immigrants from Bangladesh concluded with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985.² Hailed as a revolution of no small nature, the Agitation underlined the Assamese yearning for 'self-identity', and produced a new set of leaders and a new political party, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which was formed on October 14, 1985. AGP leaders were drawn from two influential students' bodies, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chhatra Parishad (AJYCP), as also other organisations like Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) and Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP). Significantly a founding member of the ULFA and the first Chairman of the outfit, Bhadrashwar Gohain, went on to serve as the Deputy Speaker of the State Legislative Assembly³ after being elected on an AGP ticket.

D.P. Baruah notes that,

² For a full text of the Accord, see South Asia Terrorism Portal, India, States, Assam, Documents, www.satp.org.

³ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1995, p.169.

By all accounts, the post-Accord situation in Assam was a spectacular display of mass euphoria over the victory of the Assam Movement after a six-year-long struggle in which around 800 participants and sympathisers had to lay down their lives.⁴

The euphoria, however, was short-lived. The AGP government failed to live up to the promise of the ideas and idealism of the Assam Agitation, and it was soon realised the young shoulders of the AGP leadership were simply not sufficiently broad or experienced to bear the burden of expectations and deliver what the people hoped for. A leading intellectual of the State and the present President of the Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS), Homen Borgohain observed,

They (the AGP) have introduced a different political culture, if you can call it a culture, which is totally devoid of refinement and respect for moral values... I do not mean to say that all politicians before them were saints and only the AGP politicians are a bunch of rogues. But they frighten me by their arrogance, intolerance, bad manners and disrespect for our age-old values.⁵

A series of scandals, charges of corruption and nepotism, rampant dissension within the ranks of the ruling AGP and, more importantly, a serious and persistent downslide in the law and order situation led to the imposition of Presidents' Rule on November 28, 1990.

Naissance of Terrorism

A great deal has been written on the ULFA's degeneration into a purely terrorist outfit, despite its initial harping on the ideology and goal of an independent Assam in its formative days. It is commonly argued that ULFA's ideological stage as the flag bearer of Assamese nationalism against illegal migration started waning with the relocation of its camps in Bangladesh in the early

⁴ Debo Prasad Baruah, "The Assam Accord and its Aftermath", *Peace Initiatives*, New Delhi, International Centre for Peace Initiatives, January-April 1998, p.16.

⁵ Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*, p.184.

1990s. While this assessment has a measure of truth in it, it fails to reflect, at another level, a certain ideological, motivational and operational continuity in the ULFA's character and activities. The ULFA came into existence as an organisation committed to violent means to secure its objectives and continues to function without any amendment to this basic mode of operation. Many of its 'ideological' shifts, in fact, reflect a tactical and strategic continuity that is missed in the focus on apparent historical discontinuities in the projected thinking and perspectives of the leadership.

An overview of the activities of the outfit in its formative years gives ample example of its character and intent. The first bank robbery executed by ULFA was in the Namrup branch of the State Bank of India (SBI) from where Rs. 520,000 was looted on December 11, 1982. One of the first victims of the outfit's series of killings was an Indian Administrative Officer (IAS) of Jorhat district, who was killed in 1983. On May 10, 1985, ULFA cadres looted Rs. 200,000 from the Silpukhri branch of the United Commercial Bank in the heart of Guwahati. A second raid on the SBI Namrup branch, which resulted in a Rs. 4.105 million booty, followed this.

The first prominent non-governmental killing by ULFA was orchestrated on September 17, 1986. Kalipada Sen, an advocate at the Guwahati High Court, was killed in his house at Paltan Bazar in Guwahati. In an equally prominent strike on October 15, 1988, Giridharlal Harlalka, former president of the Kamrup Chamber of Commerce, was killed in Guwahati. Almost a year later, on October 8, 1989, president of the Nalbari Chamber of Commerce was killed. This was followed by the killing of another president of the Kamrup Chamber of Commerce, Shankar Birmiwai, at Guwahati on January 20, 1990. Within the next four months, the outfit gunned down a prominent industrialist, Surendra Paul, head of the Apeejay group and chairman of the Assam Frontier Tea Company. The incidents mentioned here were only a handful of the prominent killings perpetrated by the outfit and do not indicate the intensity of ULFA's reign of terror in that decade. They do, however, reflect the fact that the selection of targets was not consistent with their proclaimed ideology of 'protecting Assamese interests'.

Some of the ULFA's early policy announcements give us an idea about the group's agenda. Apart from the May 8, 1979 Rangghar declaration, when the ULFA's founders resolved to work towards the establishment of a *Swadhin Asom*, another important prominent policy pronouncement was made on March 6, 1987. At an elaborate Press briefing away from Guwahati, the leaders of the outfit made clear that ULFA considered all symbols of the Indian state, as well as every person who had associated himself with the bloody elections of February 1983, as a legitimate target.⁶ ULFA had, in fact, killed Utsavananda Goswami of the Congress party for his alleged involvement in the 1983 electioneering process. The next noteworthy announcement was made through a special handout '*Sashastra Prachar*' released on April 7, 1989, on the occasion of the 10th foundation day of the group. Through this, the ULFA's 'publicity secretary', Rajen Sarma, underlined the need for 'armed propaganda' to achieve the organisation's objectives. (Rajen Sarma was killed in an encounter shortly thereafter).

However, the most important statement that suggested a radical shift in the outfit's agenda was made in July 1992. In a publication addressed to the 'East Bengal migrants', ULFA stated:

'East Bengal migrants are considered Assamese. Without these exploited lot, ULFA cannot be successful. These are people who are educationally, economically backward. They cannot be our enemies. These hardworking people are ULFA's protection shield... Their contribution to the national income is immense... They can produce essential things from a small piece of land, sell without any profit, work hard for the betterment of Assam, sacrificing themselves for the future of the State. They are our real well wishers, our friends, better than the Indians earning at the cost of the Assamese people.'⁷

In the same publication, ULFA went on to define the term *bidekhi* (foreigner). "Those who do not regard this State as their

⁶ "Rebels acquiring legitimacy", *The Hindu*, Chennai, March 9, 1990.

⁷ Translation of the ULFA leaflet, 'Ahombashi Purbabangia Janaganaloy', Sanjukta Mukti Bahini Ahom, 1992.

own, accept it as their motherland, are not ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of his country, are aliens, *bidekhis* for us.”

This somersault is said to have negated the very basis of ULFA’s existence and brought it into direct conflict with the vociferous students’ organisation in the State, AASU. In response, an AASU statement said: “ULFA’s misguided movement consisting of extortion and murders had destabilised the situation in Assam.”⁸ It went on to say that in ULFA’s declaration lay the basis of a plan to reduce the Assamese into a minority.

There are two ways of looking at the shift in ULFA’s posture. First, of course, is the most common approach accepted by analysts, which focuses on ULFA’s emerging compulsions and its links with the Bangladesh government. Concomitant to such an approach is the need for the Indian government to respond in terms of the increasing foreign (read Bangladeshi and Inter Service Intelligence [ISI], Pakistan’s external intelligence agency) promotion of the ULFA. This perspective, however, fails to assess the threat in its entirety. What is missed is the more important element in the shift: a tactical transformation in the social base of the ULFA.

This shift is probably analogous to the vote-bank politics practiced by established political parties in India. This shift neutralises the erosion in the traditional support base of the ULFA in Assamese society, and widens its base among the immigrant community, who are, in no measure, numerically insignificant. As M.S. Prabhakara noted,

The organisation has been sustained not merely by its numerical strength or the strength of its arms or its organising capacity, though all these, especially the last, have been considerable, but by its social base. It is the ideological and moral sanction provided by the Assamese society – even making allowance for all the fragmented nature of that structure – that has sustained the ULFA.⁹

It is within the context of this ‘social base’ that the tactical shift in the outfit’s focus on the ‘people of Assam’ and not the ‘Assamese people’ is to be understood, as are the decisive advantages that this transformation brought about.

⁸ Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*, p.233.

⁹ “ULFA’s links with Bangladesh,” *Hindu*, September 8, 1992.

It is a foregone conclusion that the establishment of the AGP regime helped nobody in the State more than the ULFA.

With the assumption of office by the AGP government, the range and the scope of the activities of ULFA increased dramatically. From killing those who obstructed the bank robberies, the ULFA began to kill, systematically and selectively, often with some advance notice, persons considered 'enemies of Assam' and symbols of the Indian State and Indian commercial and business interests in Assam.¹⁰

In the initial days, the AGP not only tolerated ULFA's heroics, but followed a completely 'hands off approach' in matters relating to the group's activities. In reply to a starred question raised by Altaf Hussain Mazumdar, the Congress Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Barkhola constituency, Home Minister Bhrigu Phukan detailed the killings of 17 persons by ULFA cadres during January 1986 and September 1987.¹¹ Authors differ in their assessment but Samir Das notes, "If official figures are to be believed, ULFA has been held responsible for 113 killings in the period of 1986-1990."¹²

Obviously, for the AGP, it was difficult to part ways with an organisation that was a product of the same 'revolution'. They probably thought that the continued exhibition of the spirit of the agitation would help consolidate the young political party's position when pitted against a seasoned and established player like the Congress. It was also true that the AGP came to face the music of its progenitor, the AASU, for lack of seriousness in implementing the Assam Accord within a year of its rule.¹³ With the AGP at the helm, the ULFA's cadres enjoyed unhindered access to the corridors of power in Dispur. This went on even while ULFA was still killing businessmen, extorting large sums

¹⁰ "Rebels acquiring legitimacy", *Hindu*, March 9, 1990.

¹¹ Reply to Unstarred Question number 282, Dated 29 March 1988, Assam Legislative Assembly.

¹² Samir Kumar Das, 'ULFA: A Political Analysis', Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1994, p.75.

¹³ Within a year of the AGP's coming to power AASU, on the occasion of the anniversary of the Assam Accord on August, 1988 blamed both the State and the Union government for a tardy and unsatisfactory implementation of the Accord. M S Prabhakara, 'Assam Government in a bind', *Hindu*, August 31, 1988.

of money from the people, looting banks and attacking security force (SF) personnel. It was apparently hoped that a continued indulgence towards the ULFA and its activities would nullify the rising murmurs of protest against the AGP. The party also needed the support of the outfit to make sure that the first experiment with a regional party in Assam did not end in a disaster.

There are reasons to believe that the thin dividing line between the troika of the Assam Agitation – ULFA, AASU and the AGP – had ceased to exist by the time the Union government decided to promulgate Presidents’ Rule in Assam on November 28, 1990. In his report to the President, the then Governor of Assam, D.D. Thakur explicitly stated: “The loss of faith in the efficacy and the credibility of the government apparatus is so great that the distinction between ULFA, AASU and AGP, which existed at some stage stands totally obliterated.”¹⁴

‘Our Boys’

There is no easy way to describe the relationship between the Assamese people and the ULFA. It would be denigrating to the people of Assam to say that ULFA enjoyed a lot of popular support among them. Author Sanjib Baruah had to fallback on the literary theory to define the relationship. The term ‘intertextuality’, which is used to define the complex relationship between one text to the other, according to him, in a way explains that issues that the ULFA raised were connected (in complex ways) to issues that had been central to Assamese mainstream social discourse.¹⁵

The extent of support for the ULFA among the masses has been a subject of extensive speculation over the years. A problem arises when analysts attempt a complete and concrete segregation of the ULFA and the common people. In such a scheme, any element of sympathy among the people for the outfit is perceived as a collusive situation, providing ideal food for thought for the conspiracy theorists. The fact, however, is that the ULFA is, and always was, an indigenous organisation. Its cadres come from the common people from various districts of the State, and had

¹⁴ Report of the Governor of Assam to the President of India, 1990.

¹⁵ Asia Source interview with Sanjib Baruah,
www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/assam.cfm.

previously lived normal lives. The sympathy they evoked among their kin and earlier friends and associates in terms of food and shelter that may be provided, or concealment of information from SF personnel (who are relatively alien), was not necessarily a show of support for the ULFA or its objectives. It was an entirely different matter that, in actual terms, such actions furthered the insurgents' cause.

Analysts have spoken of the ULFA as a mindset in Assam.¹⁶ In the initial stages of the movement, this was probably true. ULFA, in many ways changed the way the average Assamese looked at himself in the mirror. The idea of being naïve, simple and unfussy was dramatically altered by the group's activities. The hushed way of bearing the burden of their sense of alienation gave way to a much more assertive approach. It was as if the common people were rediscovering themselves through the ULFA's violence. It was in this that ULFA's strength was located. A gang of marauders became 'our boys', incapable of doing any wrong in the eyes of the Assamese. The killings themselves, or at least some of them, may have been disapproved; but were accepted as inevitable in order to make 'India hear Assam's voice.'

It is to the ULFA's credit that it succeeded in voicing the issue of Assamese alienation from the Indian mainstream in a manner and at a level that created a substantial support base among the locals even for its less savoury and illegal activities. Since the people at large tended to share the sentiment that 'India' was 'exploiting Assam', ULFA got away with the bank robberies and the murders. Nobody was particularly concerned by the fact that money looted from banks was eventually used to buy arms, set up camps and organise training facilities. Since there was an overwhelming feeling against 'Indian capitalists' making money out of the State, ULFA also got away with its extortion activities, which targeted not only the tea industry but also Marwari businessmen. Interestingly, "the Assam movement was financed by generous Marwaris who saw it as a good investment and an opportunity to placate the new rising stars."¹⁷

¹⁶ "Rebels Acquiring Legitimacy", *Hindu*, March 9, 1990.

¹⁷ Sanjayya, *Assam: A Crisis of Identity*, Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1980, p. 56.

The feeling that 'our boys' were doing their best for the State was also strengthened by the social activities the ULFA initially took up, including the campaign against social evils such as corruption, prostitution, molestation of women, drunkenness, private-tuitions, the drug-trade and trading in Rhino-horns. These certainly contributed to the popular 'legitimacy' of the group. The organisation

...also launched attacks against persons falsely claiming to belong to the ULFA. Indeed so effective has this campaign been and so much support has such small-town moralism received from ordinary people in the countryside and in small towns that several threatened victims, against whom ULFA had announced its death sentences took out advertisements in local newspapers promising to abjure their alleged wicked ways and pleading for mercy.¹⁸

A wave of sympathy and discovery of righteousness in the ULFA leadership was not limited to the common people alone. A combination of factors such as alienation, sympathy and fear produced a significant proliferation of 'sympathy' among bureaucrats, the police, the intelligentsia and, of course, politicians, albeit for different reasons. As a result, when revelations of grand scale collusion between the civil society and insurgents were made, surprisingly few eyebrows were raised.

Incidents of desertion from the service, collusion and illegal arms sale to the ULFA also occurred in the police ranks. For instance, during the AGP regime, in the early part of 1990, two police constables, Montu Gogoi from Lakhimpur district and Deba Das from Sivasagar district, disappeared with their arms and went over to the ULFA camps. On August 20, 1991, two more police constables, Rajiv Saikia and Raju Bora, disappeared along with two ULFA militants they were supposed to be guarding from the Jorhat Sadar police station. This led to Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia to issue a statement on August 21, 1991, saying that at least 500 of the police constables recruited during the AGP regime between 1985 and 1987 had links with the ULFA and four of these were actually being trained in ULFA camps in the

¹⁸ "Rebels acquiring legitimacy", *Hindu*, March 9, 1990.

Kachin state of Myanmar.¹⁹ News reports suggested that the higher officials in the police department were in possession of a good number of documents, reports and even videocassettes, which revealed the intensity of the nexus. Reports indicated that policemen had participated in volleyball matches with ULFA cadres in Lakhpathar and Chabua; attended *shraddha* (funeral) ceremonies of slain ULFA insurgents in Naharkatia; and imparted martial arts training to the cadres in upper Assam.²⁰ Later, in September 1992, media reports indicated sale of arms to the outfit from the Lighiripukhri armoury in Sivasagar district by two constables, Rajen Saikia and Dharma Kalita.²¹

Such a nexus was not confined to the lower ranks of the police machinery. Within few hours of Operation Bajrang, the Army struck at the ULFA camp in Lakhpathar, close to the tea town of Dibrugarh. However, the insurgents had already been tipped off about the raid and had deserted the camp, leaving behind books, documents and other literature. A retired senior police official indicated that a top Intelligence Bureau (IB) officer, who went on to assume an important assignment in a separate State, was the man who had a cordial relationship with the outfit and had leaked information regarding the Army raid well in advance.²²

The ULFA held sway over the media as well. A number of newspapers in the State, published both from the capital and other districts, produced each and every ULFA Press Release in verbatim. In the early 1990s, the weekly *Budhbar*, edited by the late Parag Das, acted as a front for the outfit, in which the ULFA's 'publicity secretary' answered queries and explained the organisation's policies in almost every single issue. Support extended to the organisation went beyond the mere publication of the handouts. On November 25 and 26, 1991, two journalists, Rajib Bora of the *Sentinel* and Manjit Mahanta of *Ajir Asom* were arrested for their links with the ULFA. The government accused them of running errands for the organisation, serving as low-level couriers, using their office telephones to send and receive

¹⁹ "500 police recruits have ULFA links, says Saikia", *Hindu*, August 23, 1991.

²⁰ "ULFA-Police nexus worries Saikia", *Patriot*, New Delhi, August 24, 1991.

²¹ "Sale of Arms to ULFA by Police", *Sentinel*, Guwahati, September 2, 1992.

²² Interactions with a senior retired police official in Guwahati, May 24, 2002.

messages, type, photocopy and distribute ULFA's statements among other journalists, etc.²³

The general attitude was reflected in one newspaper's comments in 1992, when the ULFA was seen to have lost a significant amount of strength due to mass-scale surrenders of its cadres. The editor of an Assamese journal, *Ami* wrote: "ULFA did not drop from the sky, nor is ULFA a wild animal. ULFA is our child. [The members of] ULFA are our brothers, they are our kin. [We must understand] why they have chosen the path of the jungle."²⁴

Collusion with the insurgents did not remain alien to the administrative ranks either. Taking a cue from their over-conciliating political bosses, a number of civil servants, including many from the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) cadre, established contacts with the outfit. Thus,

Chief Secretary H.N. Das, in a letter numbered AA162/91, dated August 1, 1992 wrote to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to take action against Panchayat & Rural Development and Food Civil Supplies Commissioner Chandra Das, Education Commissioner Prafulla Kumar Sarma and Revenue Commissioner P.C. Misra for their alleged involvement and direct connection with the ULFA.²⁵

Earlier, similar allegations were brought against S.K. Tiwari, Commissioner, General Administration Department, and P. Verma, Secretary, Transport, for maintaining direct links with the ULFA. Verma was reported to have met the ULFA 'general secretary' Golap Barua and 'foreign secretary' Raju Barua prior to their arrest in Calcutta. Golap Barua, at the time of his arrest, was carrying an identity card issued to him by Verma.²⁶

It would, however, be unfair to blame the entire workforce in the State of collusion on the basis of individual actions of certain elements. Even the accused, it must be kept in mind, were

²³ "Press under Freedom in Assam", *Hindu*, December 28, 1991.

²⁴ Quoted in Sanjib Baruah, *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.149.

²⁵ "Steps against three IAS officers likely", *The Northeast Observer*, Guwahati, November 11, 1992.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

working in an environment where the ULFA received unchallenged political patronage. Bhrigu Phukan, Home Minister during the first AGP regime, once described the ULFA as being 'from among us'.²⁷

It is extremely difficult to speculate on the extent of ULFA's penetration into the legal sections of society. While Bhrigu Phukan was only reiterating what the AGP both professed and practiced during its rule, the most serious attempt of estimating the actual number of ULFA supporters was made by none other than Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia in 1991. Speaking to the Calcutta-based newspaper, *The Statesman*, in August 1991, Saikia said that, out of a population of 22 million in the State, only 6,00,000 – a small minority, supported ULFA. Later he made a clarification saying that these 600,000 people were drawn from all sections of the Assamese society.²⁸ The numbers themselves would have to be taken with a pinch of salt, and the truth is, the ULFA as a phenomenon reigned supreme in the minds of all those who lived in Assam during that period. As Hazarika expressed it, "Not a leaf stirred without its approval, especially in the Assamese Hindu-dominated areas."²⁹ Needless to say, virtually everybody had to modify the way they lived their lives in some way or another under this dominant influence.

For the native Assamese, the situation created an option between fear and sympathy, or even support for the ULFA. For the non-Assamese business class, however, it was sheer terror that made them buy peace through payment of huge extortion amounts. ULFA 'Commander-in-Chief' Paresch Baruah was later to boast, "everyone who does business in Assam has paid up."³⁰ Following the killing of Giridharlal Harlalka on October 15, 1988, the Kamrup Chamber of Commerce brought out an 'extraordinary notice' notifying the killing, but refrained from pointing fingers at anybody. It responded through an innocuous call for a three-day closure of business establishments in the

²⁷ Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*, p.184.

²⁸ "How many back ULFA?" *Sentinel*, August 17, 1991.

²⁹ Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*, p.189.

³⁰ Subir Bhaumik, Interview with Paresch Baruah, *The Week*, Kochi, April 9, 2000.

State.³¹ But a soft state was perceived to be incapable of taking care of its constituents, and the best option left was probably to obey the insurgents' *diktat* and keep mum.

Has Anything Changed?

Ground realities have undergone serious transformations since the early 1990s. Two major counter-insurgency campaigns by the Army, a *coup* by Hiteswar Saikia through the orchestration of mass-scale surrenders of ULFA cadres that almost broke the back of the outfit, the establishment of a Unified Command Structure (UCS) for SF operations, the large-scale presence of the Army, police and paramilitary forces, daily operations by SF personnel and the establishment of regimes geared up to 'solve' the ULFA problem, and an estimated daily expenditure to the tune of Rupees 2.5 million³² in counter-insurgency operations by the Assam government, should have been enough to neutralise the this movement. However, the ULFA still exists through its sheer grit, adaptability, radical shifts in policy, tactic and strategy, but most importantly, a pattern of support that still renders it a 'state of mind' in Assam. The forms of this mindset have, of course, undergone substantial transformations since the nineteen eighties and early nineties.

The source of this strength and continuity can be discovered within a range of widely shared attitudes and perceptions, which it is useful to review in brief.

1. Commonality in outlook

It is interesting to assess how closely aligned are the views of the ULFA with those of the other legal organisations in the State. Three prominent issues that the ULFA raises from time to time need to be assessed within this context:

- i. **Negotiation with ULFA:** Of late the ULFA leadership has begun to speak in favour of negotiations with the Indian

³¹ Kamrup Chamber of Commerce, Extra-ordinary Notice, Guwahati, October 15, 1988.

³² "Assam spends Rs 25 lakh a day on anti-rebel drive", *Sentinel*, January 16, 2002. According to a Government of Assam estimate between 1990-91 and 2000-01, a total of Rs 909.01 crores has been spent on security related expenditure by the State government. See Report of the Committee on Fiscal Reforms (COFR), 2001, p. 13.

government, albeit with ‘three prohibitive conditions’.³³ Interestingly, most of the political parties in the State, including the Congress and the AGP, have voiced their opinion in favour of such a dialogue. There is an apparent tendency among them to portray the indifference of the Union government as the prime impediment in starting a negotiation process with the ULFA.

For example, successive Chief Ministers and various political leaders have repeatedly pleaded for the initiation of a dialogue with the ULFA without any pre-conditions being placed by the Union government. Thus, as recently as on June 20, 2002, Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi stated, “So far as the dialogue with the ULFA is concerned, the Centre should adopt the same principle it has adopted in its talks with the NSCN-IM.”³⁴ Earlier, on May 18, 2002, the President of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC), Paban Singh Ghatowar, cited the lack of willingness on the part of the Centre to initiate the dialogue process as the reason behind the lingering ULFA problem.³⁵ On the same day, the Chief Minister himself asserted, “If the Centre exhibits its willingness for talks with the ULFA on the line it is holding talks with the NSCN-IM, the ULFA would definitely come forward for talks.”³⁶

Similarly, on April 22, 2002, Communist Party of India (CPI)’s national executive member and veteran leader of the party in Assam, Promode Gogoi, made an appeal to the Union government to respond to the gesture of ULFA offering to participate in a political dialogue to solve the problem of insurgency in the State. He said, “The Centre should desist from asking the outfit to drop its pre-conditions.”³⁷ A few lines from a memorandum submitted to

³³ ULFA has insisted on three pre-conditions before it starts a dialogue for peace with the Union government. These conditions are (i) Dialogue must be held in a foreign country. (ii) It must be held under the supervision of the United Nations. (iii) It must be held on the issue of sovereignty of Assam.

³⁴ “CM: Talks with ULFA not in sight due to ‘one way traffic’”, *Sentinel*, June 21, 2002.

³⁵ “Ghatowar blasts Centre on ULFA talks”, *Sentinel*, May 19, 2002.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Centre should respond to ULFA’s offer”, *Shillong Times*, April 23, 2002.

the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister by Dillip Kumar Saikia, Legislature Party Secretary of the AGP, on July 7, 2002, also make interesting reading. Urging the Centre to start unconditional talks with the ULFA, Saikia wrote, "Due to ever increasing number of educated unemployed youths and very little employment avenues, many youths have taken to arms. We must not forget that these boys and girls are our brothers and sisters and we must leave no stone unturned to bring them back to the mainstream of nation building. They appear to have little inhibition about the outfit's three conditions... If the Centre comes forward with an open mind, the ULFA would also respond positively as the people of Assam and other parts of the Northeastern region want peace."³⁸ Saikia also sent a letter to the ULFA leadership to consider the option of a dialogue for peace. Significantly, there was no request made to the outfit to give up its prohibitive pre-conditions. Saikia wrote, "I would like to put on record that the people of Assam also want peace and they too wish that your organisation should express its desire to sit for a meaningful dialogue with the Central government at your earliest convenience."³⁹

Such articulation of views in favour a dialogue process fails to take note of the force-multiplying effect it has on the ULFA's existence. While there has been a bare minimum of effort on the part of these political parties to reason out with the insurgents to drop their pre-conditions, they see no problem in asking the Centre to give up its primary condition, that the talks must be held under the framework of the Indian Constitution. It is the game between political parties that seek to score points over each other in proving to the people that they all are equally committed to the cause of peace that gives ULFA some hope that it can still continue with its struggle to create a *Swadhin Asom*.

- ii. **India as a Colonial Force:** ULFA chooses to describe India as nothing but an occupying force in the State. It feels that

³⁸ "AGP tells Centre: Invite all NE ultra groups for talks", *Assam Tribune*, Guwahati, July 8, 2002.

³⁹ "ULFA urged to enter into dialogue with Centre", *Shillong Times*, July 10, 2002.

Assam's natural resources are being exploited by 'occupant India', and the indigenous population is suffering as a result. It appears convinced that Assam's cupful of woes is attributable only to the machination of the 'colonial structure' of the Indian government. Thus, the UFLA argues, "Does India have any answer sheet of solving the burning problems of Assam? Has India done anything to solve the problems like flood, unemployment, deforestation, soil conservation, illegal migration, education, and public health in its last fifty years of occupation? Does India honestly admit the value of the looted wanton (*sic*) natural resources from Assam in the good name of development and peace?"⁴⁰ Again, in a recent newsletter, the ULFA blames the woes of the State on its bureaucrats: "If we minutely observe all the eco-social erosion of our country since the time of Indian occupation it is realised that these pack of bureaucrats are the masterminds of making Assam a home of sub-continental illegal economic migrants, think tanks of cunning policy for the looting of wanton natural resources of Assam, playmakers of dividing the society of Assam in the name of Indian so-called democracy and above all the designers of the blueprint of turning Assam to a killing field. (*Sic*)"⁴¹

Political parties and civil society organisations in Assam repeatedly echo these sentiments, roundly blaming 'Delhi' for every conceivable failing or ill in the State. The State government seizes every opportunity to make it clear that Assam's financial mess is largely because of the 'indifference' of the Union government – though the State fails consistently to account satisfactorily for the large financial transfers and resources that are available to it. Even failure to pay salaries of the State's outsized workforce in time is always blamed on the Centre's 'lack of concern'. The State government has implemented no measure of fiscal or financial discipline, and the 'leakage' of government resources is both well known and monumental. Nevertheless, the strategy of blaming 'Delhi' temporarily shifts the onus to

⁴⁰ Freedom, vol. 4, issue. 3, February 1, 2001.

⁴¹ Freedom, vol. 5, issue .15, July 15, 2002.

a different sphere, and this has proven politically expedient for successive governments across party lines. Nevertheless, this strategy has gradually contributed to the growth of a general feeling of alienation among the people, and has helped the ULFA systematically extend its sphere of influence in the emerging pools of discontent.

- iii. **Immigrants from Bangladesh:** Large-scale immigration from Bangladesh remains a serious problem in the State. According to a recent study, a total of 1,298,754 illegal foreign migrants have entered into Assam between 1951 and 1991.⁴² ULFA, as of now, has little complaints against the immigrants from Bangladesh, and has established a strong presence in the minority-dominated areas of the State. There are, indeed, reasons to believe that it has recruited a number of cadres in recent months from such segments.⁴³ Media reports even suggested that ULFA cadres in Bangladesh are running schools to teach Assamese language to the ‘would-be migrants’ in order to facilitate their absorption into the established population on this side of the border. During an eviction drive, some illegal migrants revealed to forest officials that, “a school run by ULFA cadres in Srihatta district in Bangladesh trains the Bangladeshi citizens in the language before they migrate illegally to Assam.”⁴⁴

The rhetorical attitudes of the two main political parties in the State, the Congress and the AGP, remain diametrically opposed to each other. Nevertheless, both parties have ensured that the *status quo* regarding the immigrants is not disturbed. The Congress regime has remained vehemently opposed to the repeal of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983, in spite of the fact that the Act has failed to achieve its objectives. There are reasons to believe that the immigrants constitute a staunch support base for the party. That explains why a Minister in the present cabinet gets away with a public statement, “Under the Congress rule

⁴² “NGO report on illegal migrants in Assam”, *Hindustan Times*, Northeast (New Delhi), May 15, 2002.

⁴³ Conversation with a senior police official in Nalbari, February 2, 2002.

⁴⁴ “Ulfa schools groom would-be infiltrators”, *Hindustan Times* (Northeast), June 6, 2002.

Assam will become a Muslim land.”⁴⁵ Similarly, the AGP assumed power with a clear mandate to act on the migration problem. However, the problem was not even addressed during its two tenures in government, and remains as serious as ever before.

Apart from the political parties, prominent organisations involved in the Assam Agitation are also increasingly in favour of peaceful co-habitation with the immigrants. On February 12, 2002, the Assam Sahitya Sabha President, Homen Borgohain, addressing the Special Annual Session at minority dominated Kalgasia in Barpeta district, said, “Assamese Muslims of east Bengal origin are an integral part of the greater Assamese society.”⁴⁶ Such a stand invited no opposition from any other group in the State.

Clearly, then, despite the apparently ‘radical’ turnaround in the ULFA’s position on the ‘foreigners’ issue, its present perceptions and projections are entirely in consonance with the government, the establishment and various lawful institutions in the State. It is difficult to determine who sets the agenda in the State at this juncture. Is it the case that the insurgents decide on a particular course of action, with the rest eventually falling in line? Or does the ULFA choose to sail in the direction of the public mood? There are, clearly, no easy answers to these questions.

2. Civil Society

Interestingly, the vulnerability of the people co-exists with the ‘activism’ of a handful of ‘pro-liberation’ civil society organisations in the State. While a stony silence greets reports of killings, extortion and other wrongdoing by the insurgents, each death of ULFA cadres is condemned. Actions of SF personnel are routinely dubbed as harassment and human rights violations. Even today, several newspapers in the State remain openly

⁴⁵ On December 27, 2001, Ismail Hussain, Minister of State for Irrigation and Soil Conservation in the present Congress government speaking in a public meeting in Barpeta made a speech to this effect. It received wide-scale condemnation from AASU and the BJP. However, Hussain continues to be a Minister till date. For details see “12-hr Barpeta bandh today”, *Sentinel*, January 5, 2002.

⁴⁶ “E Bengal Muslims integral part of Assam: Borgohain”, *Sentinel*, February 13, 2002.

sympathetic towards the ULFA. Thus, a tabloid from Nalbari, home district of a number of ULFA cadres including its 'deputy commander in chief', Raju Barua and 'foreign secretary', Sashadhar Choudhury, published a report after the Army killed one of ULFA's top commanders, Tapan Barua on May 20, 2002:

"A huge crowd gathered in the native village of the slain ULFA leader to pay respect to the departed soul. He has been underground since last 15 years and was never arrested either by the police or the Army. Well behaved, Tapan Barua was everyone's favourite in the locality before he joined the organisation... For around four years he toured different countries receiving the necessary training. Trained in Myanmar, Kachin, Bhutan and Afghanistan, he was asked to take over as the district operation commander. Then he was made the Commander of the 7th battalion stationed in Bhutan. Before being killed Barua was the operation commander of Upper Assam and lieutenant commanding officer of the 28th battalion of the organisation. Sources say that he was very skilled in guerrilla warfare."⁴⁷

News reports of this sort would be a dream obituary for any officer in the Army. The tabloid went on to add, "ULFA will avenge the death of its top leader... Two top most leaders of the outfit were present in disguise in the funeral of Tapan Barua... They took an oath in the funeral ground to annihilate their foes and went away quietly."⁴⁸

While such support for the ULFA is openly manifested by the actions of non-governmental organisations and press organisations, there is little evidence of a troubled civil society organising itself to articulate its dissatisfaction with the unending violence and the depredations of the insurgents. There have been occasional efforts, sometimes orchestrated by state agencies, to organise some sort of anti-insurgency demonstrations and rallies – but these have an unfortunate tendency to end up generating unintended humour. On June 6, 2002, for instance, the little-known Assam Public Works organised a rally of more than 200

⁴⁷ Translation of the news item '*Gaddar satirtha: Bidrohi Tapanar achambit prashthan, sukarta Balikuchir grihabhumit luke lokaranya*', Sadiniya Amaar Nalbari (Nalbari), May 30, 2002.

⁴⁸ Translation of the news item '*Pratisodh laba Tapan haiyay: Pratighatar babe saju ULFA*', Sadiniya Amaar Nalbari (Nalbari), May 30, 2002.

parents of the ULFA cadres who marched to the office of the Assam Human Rights Commission (AHRC) to file affidavits against ULFA 'commander-in-chief' Paresh Barua. Action was sought against the ULFA chief for 'misguiding and recruiting hundreds of youths' into the outfit's cadre.⁴⁹ Interestingly, parents of senior leaders of the outfit who joined the ULFA years ago also formed a part of the drama enacted on the streets of Guwahati. In a 'You lose, I win-scenario', the administration has attempted to score points of this nature even before.

Will there ever be Peace?

To this question there are no easy answers. A newspaper editorial reacting to Defence Minister George Fernandes' June 2002 assertion that the Army would not be withdrawn from the State felt that the ULFA was already fighting for a lost cause:

Assamese know better and if a referendum is held for the ULFA's lofty 'swadhin Asom', an overwhelming majority of them will reject it. The quicker the militant outfit realises there is no alternative to a negotiated settlement, the better. For the bell is tolling for them.⁵⁰

This appears to be an oversimplification, and it is not clear that the ULFA does, indeed, face such a predicament.

Proponents of a military solution to the problem of insurgency see hope in the declining incidents of ULFA violence over the past one year. The outfit has lost a number of key commanders who were instrumental in organising major strikes on SF personnel. ULFA's last major strike was reported on January 27, 2002, when Deputy Superintendent of Police, Kamrup District, Debajit Pathak was killed in an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blast at Balapara near Boko in Kamrup district.⁵¹ Declining trends in ULFA violence, however, give little reason to predict that the outfit is on the wane. Indeed, there is evidence that suggests a significant shift in tactics, and the rising violence by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)

⁴⁹ "ULFA kin move AHRC, want children back", *Sentinel*, June 7, 2002.

⁵⁰ "Its tolls for them, For Ulfa, its dialogue or demise", *Statesman*, Kolkata, June 27, 2002.

⁵¹ "ULFA attack kills DSP, 15 hurt", *Sentinel*, January 28, 2002.

and other fringe outfits such as the Dima Halim Daoga (DHD)⁵² may well have an ULFA shadow behind it. There is, moreover, ample evidence that ULFA recruitment continues unabated, as do the organisation's efforts to create networks of like-minded organisations throughout the region.

ULFA continues to nurture hopes of an independent Assam after the eventual demise of the Indian state. Thus, Paresh Barua, the ULFA chief, argues, "Twenty years ago, no one thought the Soviet Union will crumble. A nation-state will survive only if it is inherently cohesive. That's not the case with India."⁵³ The outfit hopes that it would be impossible for the Indian state to retain its present structure amidst the plethora of conflicts based on ethnicity and religion. The belief, consequently, is that if the ULFA manages to 'hold on' for a few more years, the natural movement of history would itself secure the goal of a *Swadhin Asom*.

There is, of course, a problem in applying the Soviet model of the fragility of nation states to this particular case. Two crucial and opposing forces today act against any presumed 'historical tendency' towards the creation of an independent Assam. The first is the strengthening of the forces of globalisation. The interlinking of regions is now acting as an intense and increasingly binding force. The average Assamese, for instance, now feels far more secure presenting a pan-Assamese identity, rather than confining himself to the hard-to-crack shell of *Asomiya* individualism. An independent Assam holds much less promise for the dreams and aspirations of such an individual. Secondly, the assertion of identity by numerous ethnic sub-groups in the State precludes the militant exhibitionism of an Assamese identity. An avowal of Assamese identity runs the danger of alienating a large number of ethnic minorities in the State whose cooperation would be vital to the formation of an independent Assam.

⁵² Dima Halim Daoga (DHD) is an offshoot of the erstwhile Dimas National Security Force (DNSF) that had surrendered en masse in 1995, except for its self-styled Commander-in-Chief Jewel Garlossa, who subsequently launched the DHD. For a profile of DHD, see South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; India; States; Assam; Terrorist Groups; Dima Halim Daoga; www.satp.org.

⁵³ Subir Bhaumik, Interview with Paresh Baruah, *Week*, Kochi, April 9, 2000.

Eventual outcomes apart, the ULFA's ability to keep itself alive, and to subject the State to continued disruptive violence that undermines political order and the possibilities of development, is still not in question, and much would have to change before this capability can be neutralised. Udayon Misra notes,

...there is no denying the fact that although there has been a large degree of erosion of support for it (ULFA) among the Assamese people, yet the organisation has been continuing to draw enough sympathy from the rural masses to keep it alive as a viable striking force. Though there is large degree of questioning among the Assamese people of ULFA's policies and programmes as well as its concept of Swadhin Asom, yet a substantial part of its social base seems to be still intact.⁵⁴

The ULFA's social base will survive till such time that the Indian government succeeds in persuading the common people of the State that, under its aegis, they would be guaranteed political and economic justice. But the Union and the State governments, various political parties and civil society organisations will have a vital role to play in creating this confidence.

⁵⁴ Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland*, Shimla: Indian Institute for Advance Studies, 2000, p.147.