

## Insurgency in Assam: with Special Reference to the ULFA in the Last Decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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**Abstract:** Assam considered as the gateway to the Northeast of India was a hot bed for numerous socio-political crises in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is a land of rich natural resources such as oil, tropical forest, tea, coal, timber, silk etc. The strong sense of exploitation and deprivation has helped to generate the separatist tendencies among the masses of the region. It is said that Assamese nationalism articulated first in 1979 as a protest against immigration from Bangladesh. A moderate section of leaders of the Assam movement demanded detection and deportation of all foreigners from Assam. On the other hand the radicals formed the militant organization i.e. ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam). During this period some youths decided to take arms to carry out armed struggle to bring a revolutionary change in the political sphere of the state. Corruption in the government machinery, unemployment, influx of illegal migrants, exploitation of natural resources by the Central government without any benefit of the local people contribute the youths to support ULFA. During its first five years of its establishment this militant organization had not only engaged in some unlawful activities but also on some constructive works. But gradually, they lost its popularity and strength due to numerous factors. In this work an attempt has been made to analyze the activities of ULFA which had a great impact on socio-political and economic scenario of Assam in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Key Words:** Insurgency, Identity Crisis, Exploitation, militant activities, ULFA

### Introduction:

In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, extremism was one of the most important social and political issues of Assam. It is not a mere law and order problem but a reflection of dissatisfaction of a section of the people in the area. Assam, one of the meeting grounds of diverse ethnic groups is a part of Northeast India. Due to the political changes from the treaty of Yandaboo (1826), Assam continued to lose its territory step by step and at

present is divided into two major physical regions – the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valley. Austro-Asiatics, Negritos, Dravidians, Alpines, Indo-Mongoloids, Tibeto-Burmese and Aryans entered into the region through various routes and contributed in their own way towards the growth of a new culture and community known as Assamese. The North-east India was an insurgency prone area from the sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It took root in Nagaland and Manipur in the early fifties, in Mizoram in the sixties, in Tripura in the seventies and in Assam it has appeared in the eighties of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The geographical, social and economic and political scenario of the Northeast region added fuel for the rise and growth of insurgency. Insurgency or military can be defined as a discontent group which uses violence to achieve its goal. But it is also important that it is not an association of armed robbers or dacoits. It has some definite ideology which is in favor of economic and socio-cultural development of the land always ready to use force when objectives or targets were opposed by some groups or force.

### **Objectives:**

The main objectives of the study are:

1. It will observe the basic conditions in which violence takes root and grows in Assam
2. It will analyze the activities of ULFA and its impact on socio –economic and political scenario of Assam.
3. What is the position of ULFA in the present socio-political scenario?

### **Methodology:**

The methodology of the paper is descriptive. For the work both primary and secondary source materials like, Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, government records, books, journals, newspapers, souvenir etc. has have been consulted to achieve in the objectives.

### **Origin**

United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the most prominent militant organization of Assam, is the outcome of distrust in the democratic system of India, long neglect and economic backwardness suffered by the masses. They realized that the British system of exploitation is continuing even after independence. They regard the political leaders of the state are only the agents of the Central government. They are attracted by the ideas of Mao, Lenin, Stalin, Subhas Chandra Bose etc. For its Marxist creek it got support from China and Myanmar Kachin rebels. ULFA still maintain its presence in Myanmar.

Student communities are the forerunners of all agitations in Assam since independence. From 1957 to 1972, they fought on economic issues and for linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people. The most important agitation launched by them

is the Assam Movement (1979-85) against the foreign infiltrators (especially Bangladeshis). It is said that the seeds of militancy and attitude of secessionism were sown during that period. ULFA was the outcome of difference over AASU's central committees' tactic in conducting the Assam Movement. The dissatisfied groups preferred the idea of secession through violence and led to the establishment of ULFA on 7<sup>th</sup> April, 1979 in Sivasagar district at historic *Ranghar*. Paresh Baruah (Commander-in-Chief of ULFA) was working in the railways at Tinsukia contacted T. Muivah and Isac Swu of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). The Naga outfits sent its cadres to Moran, Namrup and Sonari (places of Upper Assam) to calculate the minds of Assamese people.<sup>[1]</sup> The initial objective of the ULFA was detection, disfranchisement and deportation of illegal immigrants from Assam.

The leading members of the organization Arabindo Rajkhowa, Hirakjyoti Mahanta, Pradip Gogoi, Anup Chetia, Paresh Baruah and Sunil Nath reportedly took arms training in Pakistan, Afghanistan and other countries and on their return took shelter in neighbouring Bangladesh and Bhutan. The organization avoided open war, sent its cadres to the Kachin jungles for training and arms. The ULFA always denied the sovereignty of India over the state. They argued that Assam was never under colonial government. So, the government of India did not have any legal right over the state. Yandaboo treaty was signed in 1826 between British Government in India and Burma and not with the Ahom's king ruling over the state at that time. The ULFA describe the glorious political and cultural history of Assam during that period and demand that Assam was an independent state at that time. The symbol of its flag is 'Rising Sun'. At the time of foundation, the following persons were elected as the member of the working committee:

Founder : Suren Dehingia

Secretary : Budheswar Gogoi (Naharkatia Chachoni)

Chairman : Buddheswar Gogoi (Moran)

Foreign Affairs : Bhuban Borgohain and Bhimkanta Borgohain

Member : Pradip Gogoi.

Other important members were Likhon Moran (Moran, Dibrugarh) , Amulya Gogoi (Doomdooma, Tinsukia) etc. Unfortunately, all leaders were arrested in 1986.<sup>[2]</sup> (Bardaichila 1985-86). After this incident Bhupen Burhagohain, Bhadreswar Gohain, Paresh Baruah, Naba Neog, Kiran Baruah, Rajib Rajkonwar and Pabitra Gogoi joined in the organization. Under Commander-in-Chief of Paresh Baruah ULFA has been continuing their activities to achieve in the goal i.e 'Swadhin Asom'..

In the mid seventies, the left parties such as communist party of India (CPI) and Communist Party Marxist (CPM), could successfully mobilize the discontented people in mass democratic movement against the misrule of the state and Central government.<sup>[3]</sup>

The Chinese aggression in 1962 added one more fuel to the history of neglect by the Central government. When Chinese army advanced right up to Tezpur, then Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru only said “My heart goes out to the people of Assam”. It proved the seriousness of the Indian government to protect its own people from enemy. These historical events are important because its memory lingered on in the popular consciousness of the people of Assam. The most important factor for the birth of ULFA is the Bangladeshi immigrant problem in Assam. It has changed not only the demographic profile of the state but also has an impact on the security of the people. Assam remained basically as an agrarian state due to the factors such as neglect of Central government, incompetence of state leadership and weakness of regional bourgeois and unwillingness of the big Indian companies to set up industries. Majority of people of the region are engaged in agriculture. The demand for cultivable lands and government jobs started growing up because alternative source of livelihood were very limited. Though Assam abundantly rich in many natural resources yet it has not been able to utilize fully. The colonial policy of diverting resource from the state and turning a blind eye to the development vis-a-vis growth of industries and developing vital lines of communication etc. are facts that cannot be denied. Unemployed youth find no way for putting their education to good use. They cannot engage themselves in business because outsiders are earning huge profits and never assist the Assamese youths. They have become frustrated and dissatisfied to the economic policies of the ruling government and gradually turned to the path of violence and secessionist activities. During the time of Assam agitation, the Assamese people were united on the issue of foreign nationals. The movement that grew becomes a highly sensitive problem where matters of law and order were involved. Assamese people became a minority in their own land due to migration of outsiders to the state. Many intellectuals also had given their support to the movement justifying it on the grounds of nationality, federalism and internal colonialism. The six years (1979-1985) Assam Movement came to an end with the Assam Accord on 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1985. The immediate result of the Assam Movement was the emergence of Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) as a regional political party in the state. After winning in the Assam Legislative Assembly Election in 1985, the party formed the state government under the Chief Minister ship of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. This was the first regional political party government in Assam after independence. Though the party came to power on the foreigners issue but only a few lakhs people could be identified as doubtful citizens.

#### **ULFA and its Activities:**

During the first phase of the AGP rule, from 1985-1990, ULFA also started a parallel government with AGP government. During that period Permanent Committee of the ULFA was vested with the power to run the organization. The members of the Permanent

Committee of the ULFA were : Arabindo Rajkhowa alies Rajib Rajkonwar (President), Golap Baruah alies Anup Chetia (Secretary), Pradip Gogoi alies Samiran Gogoi (Vice President), Paresh Baruah alies Paban Baruah (Commander-in-Chief).<sup>[4]</sup>

During the period from 1985-90 the organization adopted numerous constructive and admirable steps for the poor and needy section of the society. They formed various agricultural farms from which the youths and poor section of the society were benefited. They gave money to the poor in order to construct house, for marriage ceremony etc. Besides, they took an admirable step to remove intoxicating drugs etc. from the society. They openly punished the people who were corrupt and dishonest. For these reasons the organization was able to maintain a cordial relationship with the common people and get support from the poorer and middle class section of the society. Many government officials, politicians, bureaucrats gave shelter to the ULFA and became the keeper of money extorted by them and other weapons. They tried to make Assam as a self sufficient state.

Gradually, the organization began to involve in unlawful activities such as murder, dacoity, kidnapping, threatening etc. During the period, Lakhpathar, 7 km away from Digboi of Tinsukia district was ULFA's base camp. After 'Bajrang' operation many dead bodies of youths were recovered from that place and it was said that they were compelled to make their own graves before death.<sup>[5]</sup> The AGP government failed to control the unlawful activities of the ULFA. Consequently, the state government was dismissed. President Rule was imposed on 27<sup>th</sup> November, 1990 and ULFA was declared as unlawful organization and 'Operation Baring' was launched against it. Under Lt. General K.S. Brar, Eastern Commander of Army, 1121 numbers of ULFA cadres were arrested from 27<sup>th</sup> November, 1990 to 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1991.<sup>[6]</sup> Many powerful ULFA cadres died. In 1991 Congress (I) party came to power and Hiteswar Saikia became the Chief Minister of Assam. During his rule ULFA was divided into two groups ULFA and Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam (SULFA). This government also had failed to restore peace to the beleaguered state. During this period SULFA also had started a new chapter of unlawful activities. The common people were extremely displeased by their work. Their behavior and their mind was like that they were authorized by the government to run the illegal activities in the state. Since then Sulfa was used as a tool in the government's fight against militancy. Fratricidal clashes occurred between ULFA and SLFA at different places of the state. Conflict between ULFA and SULFA On 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 1993 at Paraliguri of Sivasagar district had resulted in the death off 14 lives. Of the 14 people, 6 were ULFA activist, 6 para-military along with 2 civilians lost lives.<sup>[7]</sup> On 19<sup>th</sup> February, 1994, Dinesh Baruah, brother of Paresh Baruah (Commander in Chief of the ULFA ) was killed by unknown killers. The government had launched the military operations like Rhino, Cobra etc to crush the militants. The army did not have any worthwhile information, not to

speak of any actionable intelligence. They continued large scale raids in villages, wanton torture and interrogation among the masses. This had led to the failure of army operations on the one hand and widespread violation of human rights on the other. Promad Gogoi, prominent leader of CPI said that before army operations started in Assam, 300 people lost their lives at the hands of the ULFA within 3 years. Comparatively, during the Congress (I) rule, 1000 people had lost their lives during the army operations launched against the ULFA. <sup>[8]</sup> A scene of terror had been started among the youths, girls and women.

The murderous attack on the Tinisukia SP within 24 hours of the Prafulla kumar Mahanta assuming the Chief Minister ship of Assam 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1996 proved that the organization would stop at nothing in their subversive activities. On 17<sup>th</sup> May, Porag Kumar Das, Executive editor of Asomiya Pratidin was gunned down in Guwahati at broad daylight. From 15<sup>th</sup> May to 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1996, ULFA violence had claimed over two dozen lives. <sup>[9]</sup> During the time of assumption of power in 1996, several top officials including the Chief Secretary and the director general of police and two other key officers of the outgoing regime left their posts and it encouraged the extremist to run the illegal activities. As a result it was not easy to tone up the machinery of the government to face the challenges posed by the votaries of violence and terrorism. with the consultation of the Central government, the Unified Command Structure was imposed against the extremists' organization. 5. On January, 1997, undeclared army rule was imposed in Assam in the name of Unified Command Structure. The three tier Unified Structure was headed by the state Chief Secretary as the head of the strategy group while the operation group was under the Commander of the army and the districts set up was under the divisional Commissioner heads of the police and the Para groups of various levels for better co – ordinations. <sup>[10]</sup> In spite of checks and balance envisaged under the UCS, the operation by the security force had made large section of people apprehensive. In the meeting of ruling party which was held on 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1997 to come into some conclusions about the peace negotiations with the extremist organization relevant resolutions was undertaken. It was like that “it was not possible to permanently solve the militant problem only by armed forces or political consultation. A proposal of a package had to be sent to the Central government including development of the region, constitutional security for protecting indigenous people. In the package unemployed would be provided with self employment, there were plans for removal of economic imbalances and to amend the constitution to preserve people's self identity. <sup>[11]</sup> But Mithinga Daimary , Publicity Secretary of ULFA denied to talk with the Central government . He again repeated the three pre conditions of ULFA 1. Discussions would be held on the condition on independent Assam.2. Discussions should be held in a third country 3. Discussions should be held in the presence of ac UN ( United Nations) observer. But there was no



possibility to abide to these conditions of the ULFA by the Central government of India. After the failure of the steps of negotiations between ULFA and the Central government Asom Sahitya Sabha one of the leading association of the Assamese intellectuals also had taken steps to end the problem by negotiations specially, Nagen Saikia , The then President of Asom Sahitya Sabha had taken a leading role but failed. The state had witnessed unabated violence and subversive activities of different militant groups for over a decade. From 1st January 1997 to 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1999 as many as 810 civilians and from 1<sup>st</sup> December, 2000 to 17<sup>th</sup> May, 2001, 224 civilians had lost their lives at the hands of the extremist. Rivalry and fratricidal violence between militant outfits had also resulted in many killings. The Unified Command Structure operation from June,1997 had been functioning with concrete result. From 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1999 to 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2000 as many as 5326 militants had been captured. As many as 584 militants had been killed in encounters with security forces during the period.<sup>[12]</sup> Not only the civilians but the ministers of AGP government were also targeted by the ULFA. PWD minister of the AGP government Nagen Sarmah had lost his life in a dastardly attack by the extremist. ULFA In the press release said that along with Nagen Sarmah about 6 cabinet ministers were targets of the ULFA's assassination attempts. They argued that the AGP government did not fulfill the promises made in the 1996 election manifesto such as greater autonomy and right of self determinations for the state instead it gradually adopted drastic steps to curb the militancy. So, they were ready to reply the leaders through the barrels of gun. Fortunately, P.K Mahanta, Chief Minister had escape unhurt from a bomb blast in Guwahati on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 1997 when he came from Barjhaar airport. On 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1998, sub inspector of Industrial Security force along with 5 security personnel were shot dead when they were going to Deva Tea Garden at Moranhat. On that they bomb blast took place at the oil pipeline of Tinsukia district<sup>[13]</sup>. One of the great mistakes done by ULFA which had been criticized internationally was the kidnapping of Sanjay Ghose on 4<sup>th</sup> April from Majuli. He was the secretary of the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development North East (AVARD NE) which was involved to save Majuli from soil erosion of the Bramaputra river.<sup>[14]</sup>

**Table: 1. Numbers of unlawful Activities of ULFA From 1995-2000**

| year      | killling | Dacoity | Rape | kidnapping |
|-----------|----------|---------|------|------------|
| 1995/96   | 1275     | 754     | 544  | 1159       |
| 1996/97   | 1511     | 821     | 558  | 1182       |
| 1997/98   | 1409     | 784     | 679  | 1272       |
| 1998/99   | 1687     | 896     | 679  | 1431       |
| 1999-2000 | 1341     | 716     | 591  | 1308       |

**Source:** Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2000, pp32-33

Due to sustained pressure from security forces incidents of violence had come down considerably. Compared to 274 civilians killed in 1997 and 386 in 1998 the civilians casualties in 1999 were 178.<sup>[15]</sup> The strength of the organization also decreases due to its division. 802 ULFA cadres had surrendered from 1996-2000.<sup>[16]</sup> During the year 2000, altogether 328 militants were killed and 1535 were apprehended in counter insurgency operations.<sup>[17]</sup>

### Findings:

The dreaded ULFA, which dared to challenge India's sovereignty over Assam, was an offshoot of the Assam Movement. The birth of ULFA paved the way for other ethnic groups to float their demands. After independence, the policies of the Central government have sharpened not only the caste, religious, linguistic and ethnic distinctions, but also have grown regional disparities and the feeling of deprivation, negligence and insecurity among the various ethnic tribal groups. At present in Assam, it is seen that, all racial and ethnic groups never triggered to form a policy which uniting them all for greater strength. Rather, they always try to maintain their own respective socio-political and ethnic identities, being suspicious, doubtful to the behavior of one another.<sup>[18]</sup> It is also to be noted that the attitude of narrow nationalism give birth to extremist organizations from every ethnic community of the state.

ULFA has inspired and attracted thousands of youths in Assam and kept the politicians and Para-military forces busy all these years. Since its foundation the ULFA has been very influential in the politics and society of Assam. There arose a major threat for Indian union in the eighties was that 'Union Home Ministry on the report of intelligence expressed its concern over the unity move of the various insurgent groups separating northeast India. The underground guerrilla outfits NSCN, People's Liberation Army (PLA) and United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur joined hands to start a concerted struggle to liberate the region from the Indian union.<sup>[19]</sup>

Insurgency related violence continues in Assam even today in a very low numbers. ULFA phenomenon can be regarded as a serious unresolved issue between the Assamese regional patriotism and pan- Indianans. So, it is true that there cannot be a sustainable peace in Assam without a political settlement between the Central government and ULFA. Former General Secretary of UNO(United Nation Organization Kofi Annan said about five strategy to fight against terrorism such as discussion, denial, deterrence, development of state capacity and defense of human rights.<sup>[20]</sup> It is seen that the Central government adopted the policy of deterrence only to solve the problem of ULFA. On the other hand the counter insurgency operations in Assam have been proved that it can help in bringing the situation under control. So, political dialogues are must for permanent political solution to the problem of insurgency.



One of the important features of the ULFA is that it never engages in ethnic conflicts like other militant organizations such as the NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland), NSCN etc. But during this period conflict between ULFA and United Reservation Movement Council of Assam (URMCA) took place. URMCA vehemently opposed the activities of ULFA. As a result, a large number of URMCA members lost their lives. ULFA justified the killings by saying that URMCA was trying to divide the Assamese nationality.

### Sum Up

To conclude, the insurgency problem can be reduced by providing gainful employment to the youths of the region. Tea, Oil, Coal, Natural gas, Petroleum products, hydroelectricity, paper wood, handloom, handicrafts, fishery, fruitage and tourism are some areas of employment generating avenues of the region. Moreover, the youths of the state are generally educated and if given encouragement and scope, definitely they can contribute to the national cause. It will help to bring back most of the youths to the mainstream of the society. Simultaneously, the entire length of the border between India, Bangladesh and Bhutan must be sealed. It will stop the ongoing free for all transit of terrorist bands through the inner boundary line.

Today, the organization has lost its original strength for various reasons. Hiteswar Saikia's (Chief Minister) surrender policy for rebels led to criminalization of politics and administration. It led to surrender of a large number of ULFA cadres. On the other hand heavy military and Para-military deployment weakened the organization. Large scale criminalization of ULFA cadres during 1990's led to its alienation from the public. They cannot give positive and hopeful message to the society. It is believed that politicians of all parties in the Northeast keep the insurgent groups alive and use its force to strengthen their own bargaining power. In its pursuits of political objectives, the ULFA neglected basic socio-economic issues centered on land, water and forest resources which are later adopted by Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) led by Akhil Gogoi. At last, it is also notable that ULFA itself is not a problem, but the issues which are mentioned by them such as foreign infiltration, unemployment, problem of flood etc. are important problems which must be taken up and settled as early as possible.

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