



ULFA's *Xhunor Axom*¹ and Negation of the State

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Abstract

ULFA responded to the larger sentiment of marginalization and exclusion within the nation by delineating an idea of separate peoplehood; exclusive of the nation. The idea of a people within a nation adorning the triple attributes—the people as a sovereign entity, which exercises power by means of democratic procedure; the people as citizens of a state, holding equal rights before the law; and the people as an ethnic community undifferentiated by distinctions of honour and prestige, but held together by common political destiny and shared cultural features— was fragmented by ULFA's formulation of identity.

Keywords: Nation, Marginalization, Ethnicity, ULFA

The people of Assam have been the worst sufferers as a result of the ongoing conflicts. Three decades of widespread human rights violation in the form of arrests, detention, killings and at times genocide have made life miserable for the democratic civilian population. As a result, over the years, various political and non-political organizations, intellectuals and various cross sections of the civil society have been demanding for a political solution for the long standing armed conflict known as “Indo Assam Conflict”. (Borbora, 2008)

The above paragraph by Arup Borbora, Spokesperson, People's Consultative Group (PCG) represents the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) not only as a civilian-armed aggression but also as a quandary that has emerged as a challenge to the process of

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nation building itself. In more than three decade of its existence, the ULFA has thrived on its foundational basis of articulating an idea of discrete peoplehood for and about the people of Assam, accentuating the question of economic deprivation by the Indian State to incur its demand for secession from India. It is ULFA's argument that India's failure to address and redress the deplorable economic condition of the people of Assam negates its sovereign power over Assam.

The United Liberation Front of Assam vehemently invaded the socio-political scene of Assam in the early 1980s. It is today a banned extremist outfit. The ULFA, as it is commonly known, has been successful in acclaiming itself to be the most intimidating form of military nationalism that continues to spur terror even to the present day. The idea it adheres to is that Assam as a territory, people and culture has never been a part of India. Furthermore, the colonial pattern of exploitation of the resources of Assam without paying dues to the development and progress of the region and its people nullifies the authority of the Indian State to govern over the region.

ULFA emerged right after and as a contrast to the Assam movement² which had placed great optimism on the Indian State and constitutional amendment. ULFA categorically refused the authority of the State. Unlike the Assam Movement, that evoked its strong socio-cultural links with the rest of India and often adopted Gandhian strategy, the insurgency led by the ULFA is clearly secessionist in nature. In its official website ULFA states its objective and goal as "To liberate Assam, (a land of 78,529 square K.M.), through Armed national liberation struggle from the clutches of the illegal occupation of India and to establish a sovereign Independent Assam" (ULFA, n.d.). In the same website

² The six years (1979-1985) long anti illegal-immigrants movement led by the All Assam Students Union which was supported by various sections of the population across the Brahmaputra valley. It ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the leaders of the movement and the Rajiv Gandhi led central government. Subsequently, the student leaders of the movement formed a political party—the Assam Gana Parishad and was elected to power in the state assembly.

ULFA validates its choice for violence as a measure to counter the “colonial occupation” of the Indian state in Assam:

Assam was never a part of India at any point of time in history. The fact is independent Assam has been occupied by India, and deploying occupation forces they are oppressing our peoples and persecuting them. ULFA itself and all freedom fighters of Assam are neither planning nor conspiring to break up India! We are not conducting any armed operation inside India. Freedom fighters of Assam are only trying to overthrow Indian colonial occupation from Assam. (ULFA, n.d.)

The ULFA since its inception has been responsible for innumerable deaths, bomb blasts, kidnapping and extortion. The key issues that it earmarked were control over the natural resources of the region, the rate and pattern of development, demographic changes and the question of preserving the traditional culture from being contaminated.

It is believed that ULFA does not possess the lethality that other insurgent groups in India do. Its armed activities are, in general, more in the nature of selective assassinations and acts of sabotage against State-owned economic assets like the oil pipeline, rather than aimless terror tactics. The Indian intelligence agency reports reveal that it possesses three times the number of weapons suitable for guerrilla activities. However, the importance of ULFA lies not in its terror activities but in the all pervasive effect on the society of Assam. The support and sympathy it received from the masses during the initial phase of its inception has been phenomenal. In those years, criticizing the ULFA was an assured means of earning unpopularity in Assam. Prabhakara (1990) says “ULFA is a state of mind in Assam”.

The emergence and popularity of ULFA not only provides a rejoinder in understanding the rise of politics on the ethnic lines in lesser developed societies but also raises questions about the relationship between development and mobilization of the people along ethnicity. Dasgupta (1991) puts forward that ethnicity is not merely as a non-rational action impinging on the rationality of

Indian planned processes of development, on the contrary, the centralized planning for economic development in India has selectively dispensed benefits of development to certain ethnic groups, encouraging ethnic dominion and subsequent ethnic mobilization by the other groups. Democratic rules, as existing in India, provide options to such access through its inclusionary avenues. Chatterjee (1997) echoes similar thoughts with regard to the process of planning for economic development in India. He is of the opinion that among the other functions that the process was conceived would perform, it was also a modality of the post colonial state to illustrate a critique to the colonial reign. As alien rule instilled exploitation and large-scale poverty, self-rule would do the reverse—development and progress. It was a means to generate national consciousness (Chatterjee 1997), failing which it follows that the sense of colonialism still persists. If this is the economic base for assessing the success of post colonial nation, then rise of ULFA and the immense popularity it gained among the masses during its initial period of emergence alludes to the fact that the Indian State has not been able to deliver its goals of post colonial economic prosperity in Assam. ULFA's demand for secession was fostered by its ability to repudiate Assam's political and cultural history with that of India. By articulating a distinctive disjuncture, it elucidated that ULFA was not a mindless terrorist organization but was an outcome of the gross malevolence that was being meted out to the people of Assam for a very long time. Its goal was to achieve the apostle of dignity of a people—"freedom". An important terrain that can be marked that has enabled the ULFA to formulate its idea of separate peoplehood for the people of Assam is the general feeling of exclusion that Assam, so also the entire North East region, suffers from. Being a land frontier and because it is connected to the rest of India only by a narrow strip of land, the people and their culture are generally believed to have closer affiliations with the people of adjoining border countries rather than with the rest of India. These sociological writings along with government records, the prevalent stereotypes, all conform to the view that Assam, so also the entire North East region, as a geographical and cultural entity is distant from mainland India. India, in this paper, is not just an "ideological apparatus of state power" (Bhabha, 1990) neither is it a nostalgia for a national

culture. It is more Bhabha's sense of a nation that is narrated, and Assam is at least one of its ambivalent margins³.

"My heart goes out to the people of Assam" and the Narrative of Exclusion

Assam, so also the entire north eastern region of India, is located in a geographically isolated zone, connected with rest of the country only by a narrow "chicken's neck corridor" or the "Siliguri corridor", 37 km long and 21 km-40 km in width which connects the landmass of the north eastern India to rest of the country. This geographical periphery in many ways coincides with the socially exclusionary sentiments, which represents alienation from or by the rest of the country towards or with the north eastern states. Many corners of the region time and again begrudge being "ethnically" and politically sidelined.

The first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru's abdication of Assam at the peak of Chinese aggression is an incident cited with immense antipathy even to present day. The instance is brooded upon to reckon the Centre's seal of exclusionary stance towards the region. On November 20, 1962, Nehru addressed the nation on All India Radio saying, "Huge Chinese armies have been marching in the northern part of NEFA. We have had reverses at Walong, Se La and today Bomdila, a small town in NEFA, has also fallen. We shall not rest till the invader goes out of India or is pushed out. I want to make that clear to all of you, and especially our countrymen in Assam, to whom our heart goes out at this moment" (Mitra, 2012). The words are understood by the people of Assam as connoting unconcern and betrayal

³ The marginal or 'minority' is not the space of a celebratory, or Utopian, self marginalization. It is a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity—progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past—that rationalize the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative. In this sense, then, the ambivalent, antagonistic perspective of nation as narration will establish the cultural boundaries of the nation so that they may be acknowledged as 'containing' thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production. (Bhabha 1990:4)

(Guha, R., n.d.). Nehru is believed to have given up on the region, instead of demonstrating a strong challenge against the intruders. He is thought to have turned his back on the region⁴. The words of Nehru, “My heart goes out to the people of Assam” are often iterated in public and social discourse within Assam which has instilled a sense of hurt and has perpetuated feeling of disintegration in the psyche of the people of Assam. Memories of life, social and political, in the nascent nation did not bring about a sense of security and unity to the people residing in this periphery which was already struggling with economic and developmental crisis.

The north eastern region not only lags behind from some of the other states of India, industrially and commercially, but it also lacks even in the basic infrastructural facilities required for the development of trade and commerce. Most of the north-eastern States do not figure in the railway map of the country. In Assam there has been little development in the sphere of railway transport. The metre-gauge line was laid by the British nearly 100 years ago, with the aim of facilitating the movement of tea and troops. It has only recently been partially upgraded to broad-gauge. The few roads are practically the only means of transport for the common people in both the hills and the plains of the region, these too are in deplorable state due to poor maintenance. The rains, which are quite often, turn vast areas into virtually isolated zones, cut off from the rest of the country.

Misra (2000) engages with the idea of “periphery” and the “mainland”. Misra writes that “certain secessionist ethnic movements cannot be explained in terms of simple economic criteria such as uneven or lop-sided development or disjunction between industry and agriculture” (Misra 2000). They need to be

⁴ No printed version of the speech is available. It has not been reproduced in the various volumes of Nehru’s speeches. The recording of the tape is unavailable in All India Radio office. Those sympathetic to Nehru argue that the sentiments expressed in the words were Nehru’s concern and love for the region but the general understanding among the masses regarding the attitude adopted by the Centre at the time of this emergency was that of insensitivity and lack of care.

understood in a historically imbibed sense of alienation and exclusion. The main promises of India nation building – political participation, equal treatment before the law and protection from the arbitrariness of state power, dignity for the weak and poor, and social justice and security – were apparently not met in the case of Assam.

The north eastern part of India is also marked by its international boundaries; the region shares more than 4500 km of international border (about 90 per cent of its entire border area) with China (South Tibet) in the North, Myanmar in the East, Bangladesh in the South-West, and Bhutan to the North-West. Hence it has been historically treated as a “land frontier”. The land has been considered to be “distant” and the inhabitants “exotic”⁵. The general imagination about the land in the minds of general “mainlanders” is that the entire north eastern part of India is a homogeneous entity; the land of savage “head-hunters”, dog meat eaters and land of tantra having innate ability to turn human to sheep or goat and enslave in his/her land forever. In every day parlance “racial profiling”, stereotyping and prejudices against the people of the north eastern India raises its ugly face time and again (Delhi listens, n.d.; Does the Northeast belong, 2011). Yengkhom Jilangamba (2012), hailing from Manipur and teaching at the Centre for the Study of Developing Society, Delhi describes the plight of students from the north eastern states in other parts of the country as:

The mysterious death of Loitam Richard in Bangalore, the murder of Ramchanphy Hongray in New Delhi, the suicide by Dana Sangma and other such incidents serve as reminders of the insecure conditions under which people, particularly the young, from the north-east of India have to live within the metros of this country. What these deaths

⁵S.C. Kakati (1954) describes that Mahatma Gandhi too was influenced by such preconception which led him to consider the people of Assam as savage in his *Hind Swaraj* (1909). Later he made amendments “Lovely Assam” published in *Young India* on 1 September 1921 after he visited Assam.

have in common is that the three individuals were all from a certain part of the country, had a “particular” physical appearance, and were seen as outsiders in the places they died.

For north-easterners who look in a particular manner, everyday living in Indian cities can be a gruelling experience. Be it the mundane overcharging of fares by autorickshaw-wallahs, shopkeepers and landlords, the verbal abuse on the streets and the snide remarks of colleagues, friends, teachers, or the more extreme experiences of physical and sexual assaults. It is often a never-ending nightmare, a chronicle of repetitive experience. (Jilangamba, 2012)

The feeling of discrimination and exclusion is a recurrent premise that the people from the north east region of India identify with while being and travelling in other parts of the country.

ULFA responded to the larger sentiment of marginalization and exclusion within the nation by delineating an idea of separate peoplehood; exclusive of the nation. The idea of a people within a nation adorning the triple attributes—the people as a sovereign entity, which exercises power by means of democratic procedure; the people as citizens of a state, holding equal rights before the law; and the people as an ethnic community undifferentiated by distinctions of honour and prestige, but held together by common political destiny and shared cultural features— was fragmented by ULFA’s formulation of identity. For the ULFA, the people of Assam were not sovereign or citizen subjects of India but were complete nationals belonging to a territory unfairly occupied by the Indian forces. S S Khaplang, self-proclaimed president of the Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland (GPRN) which is a confederation of ultras of north eastern India, and has sheltered in eastern Nagaland several rebel outfits during Indian and Bhutanese military operations against them, in an interview published in *The Week* restated that the north eastern India was never a part of India. He claims that groups like the ULFA, United National Liberation Front, People's Liberation Army and a few other organizations from the region have been working in close collaboration. “If we work together, it would be easier to achieve independence, sovereignty and recognition in international fora. A united front

would benefit us, in terms of sharing information and operational coordination”(Northeast was never a part of India, 2012).

For the ULFA, evidently, the imaginations of the identity pursued what Ernest Gellner conceptualized as Nationalism, that is, “not the awakening and assertion of these mythical, supposedly natural and given units. It is, on the contrary, the crystallization of new units admittedly using as their raw material the cultural, historical and other inheritances from the pre-nationalist past” (Gellner 1983). Self imagination or the framing of identity of Assam by the ULFA was not sectional and corresponding subnationalist but it was in entirety – the National. Unlike its precedent, the Assam movement, ULFA’s contest of identity was not within the parameters of citizenship but it was right outside and in actual negation of it.

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