## Chapter 2: ULFA’s Xhunor Axom and Negation of the State

Table of Content

“Colonial Pattern of Economic Exploitation of Assam”: Mapping the Hinterland..... 104

“My heart goes out to the people of Assam” and the Narrative of Exclusion.......... 112

“… why they have chosen the path of the jungle?” Understanding the indices of violence... 118

Conceptualization of the self—Framing of the identity by the ULFA....... 124

Disenchantment towards ULFA’S Xhunor Axom.... 127

Ethnicizing the Narrative of Injustice and Exploitation- ULFA’s Violent Rejoinder........ 132

Conclusion............. 138
Chapter 2

ULFA’s Xhunor Axom¹ and Negation of the State

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 organization, intellectuals and various cross sections of the civil society have been demanding for a political solution for the long standing arm conflict known as “Indo Assam Conflict”. (Borbora 2008:3)

The above paragraph from the Comprehensive Note on Armed Conflict in Assam (India) and Political Resolution through Peace Process presented at the 9th Session of Human Rights Council in Geneva 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 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 chapter identifies three interlocutors that exist in the common parlance of Assam, which was used by the ULFA as its medium to frame a separate identity of the self. The chapter argues that ULFA is a rejoinder of the already existing narrative of injustice and exclusion. This narrative was endowed with a violent ethnicized turn by the ULFA.

The United Liberation Front of Assam vehemently invaded the socio-political scene of Assam in the early 1980s with a series of political assassination and bank robberies², though it

¹ Golden Assam

²
claims to have founded itself in the late 1970s. It is today a banned extremist group. The ULFA, as it is commonly known as, has been successful in acclaiming itself as the most intimidating form of military nationalism which continues to spur terror and violence till present day. The idea it adheres to is that Assam as a territory, people and culture has never been a part of India. Further, 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 Indian State to rule over the region.

ULFA emerged right after and as a contrast to the Assam movement which had placed great optimism on the Indian State and constitutional amendment. ULFA categorically refused the authority of the State. Unlike the Assam Movement, which evoked its strong socio-cultural links with the rest of India and which often adopted largely Gandhian strategy, the insurgency led by the ULFA is blatantly secessionist in nature. In its official website ULFA states that, “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” as its objective and goal. In the same website 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. (http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434/ulfa.htm)

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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 thrice the number of weapons suitable for guerrilla activities. However, the importance of ULFA lies not on 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. For M.S. Prabhakara (1990), “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 in the ethnic lines in lesser developed societies but also raises questions about the relationship between development and mobilization of the people along ethnicity. Jyotindra Das Gupta 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 exists in India, provide options to such access through its inclusionary avenues. (Das Gupta 1991:145-47). Partha Chaterjee echoes similar thoughts with regard to the process of planning for economic development in India, 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 of generate national consciousness (Chatterjee 1997:276-77) Failure of which, would then follows, 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.

An overview of Assam’s economic background presents an apparent picture of disparity. The state lags far behind both industrially and commercially. In contrast to the state’s relative poverty, it is rich a rich source of oil, tea, coal, and plywood. Though Assam supplies 60% of India’s crude oil, it receives from the central authority only 3% of its value in the form of royalty. Assam is major centre for tea in India, only a small portion of the tea produced is sold in Assam through auction, 85% is sold through west Bengal and London auction. In fact Assam’s share of tea royalties is less than half that which west Bengal receives. Assam supplies 60% of India’s plywood but only a very small part of the return from the product is retained by the state-an inappropriately large share goes to the centre in the form of taxes (Das Gupta 1991:157, Misra, T 1980: 1354-64). A general feeling of deprivation and neglect among the masses was already in place much before the ULFA raised it scrupulously. The preceding Assam movement was also on the issue of control of the resources within the state and access to national resources by those who considers themselves as “authentic” citizens of India. The Assam movement also, before the ULFA raised the issue of underdevelopment but the fundamental divergence was the difference of attitude towards the Indian state. While the Assam movement saw the Indian State
as an apostle of justice, the ULFA rejected the authority of the Indian State. By the invocation of
the long history of disjuncture, demographically and emotionally, they appropriated their claim
for complete secession from India. This feeling in many ways resonated with the deep seated
grievance of exclusion which heightened the acceptance and popularity of the ULFA among the
masses at the time of its emergence. The Indian State however did little in terms of its responses
to the political and ideological challenge posed by ULFA. The reaction to ULFA from the Indian
State was mostly military.

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 since a very long time. Its goal was to achieve
the apostle of dignity of a people- “freedom”. Three important interlocutors can be marked as
the terrain that enabled the ULFA to formulate its idea of separate peoplehood for the people of
Assam. These three inter-related interlocutors which buttressed its claim for uprising and
vindicated its subsequent goal of secession can be pinpointed as: the idea of colonial pattern of
exploitation of the Assam’s natural resources, social exclusion by mainstream India and India’s
illegitimate occupancy over the land and people of Assam.

“Colonial Pattern of Economic Exploitation of Assam”: Mapping the Hinterland

The idea that Assam is a land neglected and exploited throughout the history is not a notion
introduced by the ULFA. The social discourse within Assam contains deep seated resentment
towards the attitude of the Centre in regards to its interest.
A vast body of post Independence writing on Assam has critiqued the socially exclusionary and economically disparate attitude of the State towards the region. Tilottama Misra (1980) in the article “Assam: A Colonial Hinterland”, resonated the censure of a large section of Assam’s intelligentsia in regard to the economic policies of the government towards the state. She termed the economic strategy of the Indian state as “colonial pattern of exploitation of Assam’s natural resources”. Misra, points out that Assam despite being the country’s largest producer of tea, oil, plywood and forest products is one of the poorest and industrially most backward states of India. Her article was published at the peak of the Assam movement detailing out the putative economic exploitation of the resources of Assam, “A positive outcome of the nine-month old agitation on the foreigner’s issue in Assam in the growing awareness among the Assamese people of being subjected gross economic exploitation on a scale comparable to, and sometimes even worse than in, the pre-independence days” (Misra 1980: 1357). She describes the economic situation of Assam vis-à-vis the national and points out that:

Despite being the country’s largest producer of tea, oil, plywood and forest products, Assam is one of the poorest and industrially most backward states of India. India annually earns millions of rupees as foreign exchange from Assam’s products, but the per capita income (at current prices) of Assam in 1976-77 was only Rs 816 (one of the lowest in India) as against the per capita National Income of Rs 1,049 for that year. Manufactured goods from the metropolitan centres in other parts of the country are sold in Assam at three to four times their original price. About 23 percent of the per capita income of Assam is spent in buying consumer goods from outside the state. (Misra 1980: 1357)

Misra in her article delves into all the major economic resources of Assam namely tea, petroleum, natural gas, plywood, fertilizer and jute and underscores the “extractive enterprise” of the central government in each of these industries.

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To understand the extent of exploitation, the Assam tea industry is an important source. The Assam tea industry was established by the British colonial rulers in 1834. It is the country’s highest and one of the world’s highest tea producing regions\(^5\). However, the total annual profit and foreign exchange earned from the tea gardens of Assam is several times more than the total annual revenue received by the state. In 1980, at the helm of the Assam movement and beginning of the ULFA stir, Jyotirmoy Basu (CPI (M)) in Lok Sabha session while speaking on Appropriation Bill of Assam Budget pointed out that Assam gets on 22 crores of the tea produced in the state whereas West Bengal gets 42 crores as sales tax for the tea from the Assam gardens auctioned in Calcutta\(^6\). Assam is entitled to an agricultural tax imposed on 60 percent of the profit from the tea gardens, while the Central government is entitled to an income-tax on 40 percent of the total profit. But it is widely believed that the Indian and foreign capitalists conceal most of the profits, thus robbing the state from its due share of revenue and taxes (Borgohain 1980: 43-47). It was only in 1970 that Guwahati Tea Auction Centre was inaugurated. Even the main office of the Tea Board, which is the highest authority in relation to the tea industry and which besides implementing the Tea Act of 1958 is also responsible for approving grants, loans, and labour-welfare projects, is situated in Calcutta.

Assam is rich reservoirs of crude oil and natural gas. During the 1980s Assam had an estimated reserve of 70.46 million tonnes of crude oil and 23,000 million cubic meters of natural gas. About 43 lakh tonnes of crude is produced by the oil fields of upper Assam and since the crude has very high percentage of aromatic content, it is rated high in the world market. According to the international price standards, Assam crude should cost at least 1.5 times more than the low grade Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) crude. But

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\(^5\) Present day Assam has around 850 tea estates and more than 2500 tea gardens. Each year Assam produces around 6,80,400 kgs tea.

despite possessing such rich resources, Assam’s economy gets little from its oil. The Centre has
time and again refused to establish large public sector refineries in Assam in spite of mass
movements\textsuperscript{7}. Alongside, the by-product kerosene produced in the refineries of Assam is carried
by a product pipe-line all the way to Siliguri in West Bengal where the marketing division of the
product is situated and from there it is distributed to the north eastern states for their
consumption. As a result of this, not only do many areas in Assam suffer from acute shortage of
kerosene but the state is deprived of the sale revenue which goes to West Bengal. Furthermore,
the royalty given to Assam for petroleum is meager\textsuperscript{8}. Similarly, about 50 million cubic feet of
natural gas is being flared off daily in different oil fields of Assam for several decades. Had these
been properly used, Assam would have turned into one of the richest states regarding power
generation and production of various industrial goods like different types of rubber, plastic,
nylon, polyester fibres, paints, dyes, lacquer, pesticides and various other chemicals. Due to
almost non-utilization of the natural gas and the by-products of the crude refined in Assam, no
ancillary industries have been set up in Assam.

Another economically viable industry of Assam is the plywood industry which like the
other resources is severely extractive in nature. Almost 80 percent of the plywood produced in
the factories in Assam is transported by road and rail to depots in other parts of the country. Not
one sale depot was situated in Assam during the 1980s though the state produced several lakh
cubic meters of plywood. Not a single plywood factory was owned either by the local people or

\textsuperscript{7} Suggestion put forward by Soviet experts on basis of extensive surveys for the establishment of large scale refinery
at Silghat in Assam was rejected outright. Instead it was established in Barauni in Bihar for refining the crude oil
from Assam which has a capacity to refine more than 30 lakh tonnes of crude. Mass movement against the unfair
decision of the Centre was staged in Assam in 1956-57 following which a small refinery having capacity of 7 lakhs
 tonnes was established in Guwahati. Another mass movement shook the state in 1969 following which the Centre
set up second public sector refinery in the state. This time too the new refinery-cum-petrochemical plant fell short of
the Barauni refinery and had only 10 lakh tonnes capacity.

\textsuperscript{8} Just before the Assam movement and the ULFA stir commenced, the state government had submitted a
memorandum to the Centre demanding the revision of oil royalty from Rs. 42 to Rs. 315 arguing that since crude
was a non-replenishable commodity the proprietors of the natural resource should be adequately compensated.
by the state government; neither was a single plywood sale agency was given to anyone from Assam. Gross discrimination was meted out against the local in the employment in the plywood factories. More than 76 percent of recruitment in the highly paid managerial category, the recruitment was from outside the state while more than 42 percent of the lower category job-holders are also from other parts of the country. (Misra 1980 1357-1362)

The story is not much different regarding other resources of Assam, namely jute and silk. Nothing substantial has been done regarding these two rich resources which have much economic potential. West Bengal, Assam and Bihar are the only three jute producing states in India which together produce the highest quantity of jute in the world. There were 68 jute mills in operation in India in the 1980s of which only one was in Assam. West Bengal had had 56 and Bihar three, rest of them were in states which did not produce jute at all. Moreover, the Jute Corporation of India and STATFED bought jute at Rs 175 per quintal from Assam while they paid Rs 225 per quintal to West Bengal for the same quality of jute. Assam produces a wide variety of silk. The primary ones being the Assam silk, Endi and the Muga silk. It is among the largest silk producing states of the country. No measure has been taken up to organize the silk industry on a commercial edge.

The economy of Assam represents a unique case of poverty amidst plenty. It is often alleged from various quarters in Assam that economic development after the Independence has done little to alter the colonial pattern of exploitation—exploitation of the natural resources of the state by outside forces for their profit and the use of the state as a captive market for goods from outside sold at inflated prices. Right after the Independence, till the 1950s Assam was considered to be one of the prosperous states of the country. The per capita income of Assam was a higher than the all-India level. It consequently slipped down and has remained
substantially lower than the national average in recent decades. Along with it, the gap between the state’s average level of living and that of the national average has been increasing in recent years. The average per capita income of Assam stood at Rs 1374 for the triennium 1980-81 to 1982-83 at 1980-81 prices. It was about 18 per cent lower than the corresponding national estimate of Rs 1672 for India as a whole. The difference widened to more than 45 per cent in recent years when average per capita income of Assam and all-India stood at Rs 1702 and Rs 3211 respectively at 1980-81 prices for the triennium 1999-00 to 2001-02.

ULFA’s aggressive intervention beckoning the unscrupulous exploitation of the resources of the state struck a chord with the general masses and the intelligentsia which had been witnessing the pillage and nurturing a sense of resentment since a long time. Nilanjan Phukan has written about the abdication of the government in fulfilling its duties and in the same vein supporting the path of the ULFA writes:

Instead of controlling the floods and arranging for irrigation for winter crops, which would have helped numerous small peasants living from hand to mouth, the central government can only think of draining off the ‘surplus water’ to feed the rich farmers’ fields in the UP and south India. The income from oil royalty for the state is still a very negligible fraction of the price of the oil and petroleum products. The top posts in the forest services are being shunted off to people from outside the state, and there are plans to shift the oldest forestry institute in the country from the state to a location in south India. Tea gardens do not pay wages to the hapless labourers on Sunday on the grounds that they do not work on Sundays. All that the tea company has done for the vaunted development of the state serves after all primarily their own interests. Not a paisa was given in donation to the college and universities of the state until the ULFA started its campaign of extortion, out of hundreds of crores earned as profits. On the other hand the Saikia government has so far exempted the gardens from taxes to the tune of Rs. 130 crores, and that too at a time when all development work has ground to a halt for lack of funds. The state of underdevelopment, aided and abetted by nationalized banks that pumped out several times more money than they care to deploy in helping local development, makes self-employment a chimera and the dignity of labour an empty slogan. For thousands of frustrated and unemployed youth the only source of income are crime and shady business of all sorts. The state government seems to be encouraging these trends by promoting daily lotteries which are another name of gambling.
While in the rest of the country extension of railway routes is almost a routine affair, in Assam most big towns are still to be linked to railway lines, or at most are poorly served by the existing connections. Only a small percent of the railway track is broad gauge. Even the national highways are badly maintained. As for power, with a recent 200 percent hike in electric tariff few local industries are left with hope of prosperous growth. The hike was forced apparently by the state government’s refusal—under instruction from the centre—to continue and annual subsidy. Now that the World Bank is insisting on a reduction in a share of the states in funds regularly distributed under the Finance Commission’s dispensation, the state government is bound to experience unprecedented penury. As it is, last year more than 600 crore out of a total of central grants amounting to 800 and odd crore were kept back as repayment of earlier debts. (Niranjan Phukan 1993:2014)

Agriculture is the mainstay of more than 70 percent of the state’s population. According to 2001 census, 2.66 crores of the total population of the state depends upon agriculture fully or partially. Nearly 40 percent of the state’s income is contributed by agriculture. However the share of agriculture in state income has undergone sharp fluctuation. In the 1950s the share was approximately 60 percent, in the 1980s it was 50-55 percent and it was only 35 percent after the 1990s. The production of food grains, oilseeds and other important crops in the state has been reported to be far below the targeted level during the 9th plan period. The annual production of rice has maintained an upward growth but the total production has not been adequate to provide food security to all the people of the state. Inadequate irrigation, floods and archaic methods of agriculture are identified as the major causes for the low levels of production and productivity in agriculture in the state.9

ULFA’s mouthpiece, its website, reiterates that, “The British as a colonial power with a history of looting and exploitation of underdeveloped countries all over the world, did the same in Assam. The Indian colonial govt. has been perhaps the most ardent students of the British and continued this exploitation of all of Assam's natural resources, however in a more subtle and

The ULFA resents that the special clauses inserted in Indian constitution such as the Articles 246 to 248 that ensured that Assam did not gain much from its natural resources. The ULFA accuses the central government of plundering the wealth of Assam and not giving its due share.

The idea of Assam as a colonial hinterland has existed in the psyche of common people of Assam since and long time. ULFA intervention only accentuated the existing sentiment of


11 Central Government Act

Article 246 in The Constitution Of India 1949

246. Subject matter of laws made by Parliament and by the Legislatures of States

(1) Notwithstanding anything in clauses (2) and (3), Parliament has exclusive power to make laws with respect to any of the matters enumerated in List I in the Seventh Schedule (in this Constitution referred to as the Union List)

(2) Notwithstanding anything in clause (3), Parliament, and, subject to clause (1), the Legislature of any State also, have power to make laws with respect to any of the matters enumerated in List III in the Seventh Schedule (in this Constitution referred to as the Concurrent List)

(4) Parliament has power to make laws with respect to any matter for any part of the territory of India not included (in a State) notwithstanding that such matter is a matter enumerated in the State List

(http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/77052/)

Central Government Act

Article 248 in The Constitution Of India 1949

248. Residuary powers of legislation

(1) Parliament has exclusive power to make any law with respect to any matter not enumerated in the Concurrent List or State List

(2) Such power shall include the power of making any law imposing a tax not mentioned in either of those Lists

(http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/1270258/)

12 The people of Assam have never benefited from the oil revenue. On the other hand they have been kept completely in the dark and not informed about the factual reality of the oil reserves, its production, refinement, sales, revenue accrued etc. In 1948 Delhi and its appointed oil companies sold a metric tonnes (MT) of Assam's crude oil at Rs. 1382. Assam received Rs. 61 per MT as royalty. As taxes the central government received Rs. 532 and gave Assam Rs. 131 out of this. In subsequent years the price of oil increased substantially but the minimal royalty did not, in equal ratio. In 1991-92 the natural gas in Assam was still not utilized fruitfully. 56% was flared off. The official figures in 1992-93 were Rs. 30 lakh per day of natural gas wasted.

resentment, which is many ways explain the support base of ULFA among the general masses. ULFA’s envision of retrieving *Xhunor Axom* (golden Assam)\(^{13}\) from the clutches of plunderers struck chord among the public during the initial phase of its inception.

During the initial days of the ULFA when it had not yet paved its way in the socio-political realm of Assam, in November 1980, there was an armed bank robbery in Assam involving Manipuri and Assamese youth. When the Manipuri People’s Liberation Army (PLA) leader Biseswar was arrested in this context, one of his associates arrested along with him was an Assamese—Naren Gohain. On questioning, Gohain told a reporter that he chose the path of insurgency in order to oppose the exploitation and oppression of the region, that is, New Delhi’s treatment of the region as a “colony” and because he had lost faith in the constitutional process. This was one of the first instances that the seed of violent resistance evoking the colonial theory was reported\(^{14}\).

**“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 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.

\(^{13}\) The romantic idea of Assam being adorned with natural and aesthetic glory has been a strong narrative within Assam which finds its place in numerous poetics. Among them, cultural icon of Assam Bhupen Hazarika, has sung and composed several songs around the idea. “Axom aamar rupohi gunoru nai xekh…” (Our Assam is laden with priceless qualities…) is one such popular song that has been sung and heard since several generations.

The first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru’s abdication of Assam at the helm of Chinese aggression is an incidence sited 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”\(^{15}\). The words are understood as connoting unconcern and betrayal by the people of Assam. 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 region\(^{16}\). 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 far behind from some of 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

\(^{15}\) Naresh Mitra. *Times of India*. Guwahati. 6 October 2012.

\(^{16}\) Though no printed version of the speech is available neither it has been reproduced in the various volumes of Nehru’s speeches. The recording of the tape is also 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 uncared for.
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.

Udayon Misra in his work *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenge to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (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: 157, 183), they need to be 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, Mayanmar 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”\(^\text{17}\). 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

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\(^{17}\) S.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.
having innate ability to turn human to sheep or goat and enslave in his/her land forever. In everyday parlance “racial profiling”, stereotyping and prejudices against the people of the north eastern India raises its ugly face time and again18. Yengkhom Jilagamba (2012), himself 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 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 autoricksaw-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. (http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/lets-stop-pretending-theres-no-racism-in-india/article3466554.ece)

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 of—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

18 http://www.sunday-guardian.com/analysis/delhi-listens-to-northeast-s-concerns-for-a-change
of Assam were not sovereign or citizen subjects of India but were complete nationals belonging to a territory unfairly occupied by the Indian forces\(^\text{19}\). SS. Khaplang, self-proclaimed president of

\[^{19}\text{Assam was unfortunately annexed to India because of the trickery and conspiracy of the Congress, the British sponsored association of the "Indian elite".}\]

The exploitation, oppression and the looting of wealth remain undeterred today as before. The only difference is that, previously the colonial exploitation was manipulated by the British imperialists directly but now Assam comes under direct Indian colonial exploitation and on the other hand under the indirect International Monopolistic entrepreneurs as an alliance of Indian big business.

The identity of the indigenous peoples of Assam is now threatened because of these double layered exploitations. On the other hand, the Indian government has arranged to form the powerless Assam government with the help of some puppets under the Indian constitution having a governor directly appointed by New Delhi. Elimination of all the basic rights with the help of the direct governing system of Delhi, the Indian government has made their way clear. At the time of power transfer to the loyal Congress leadership by the British, the Congress leadership took the chair of ruler without changing anything of the Indian constitution which was drafted on the model of the British system. The Indian constitution has failed to open any route to the development of other nation-tribes providing self-determination right to them and to eradicate its eccentric character which is amended 85 times up till now. However, it makes a new social base loyal to the colonial India crushing the demographic structure of the nation-tribes. It is the manifestation of the previous social base established by the British. This servant or sycophant class is helping the caretaker government of India stationed at Gauhati making a favorable environment for administration and exploitation by the slogans like "united India", "India is our mainstream", "we are all Indians" who are totally unsympathetic to the rights, honour and the identity of the indigenous peoples of Assam. This puppet class is creating the environment of hatred, differences and conflicts among the indigenous nation-tribes. This class is more brutal than the British in suppressing the legitimate struggle of the indigenous peoples, the democratic non-violent movement organized with the of hope of emancipation of the peoples of Assam who have been pauperised and deprived of their basic rights in their own Motherland. Therefore, the indigenous peoples of Assam under 51 years of Indian colonial rule have been tasting the bitter experiences of brutal repression upon unarmed movement. Now Assam and the whole of so-called North-Eastern region is subjected to the colonial system of Indian ruling class through their repressive administration behind the veil of fake democracy. They are conducting their cultural, economic and political repression under the cover of Indian constitution. With these rules and systems, the Indian government has closed all the doors to the solution of "Nation Problem of Assam" establishing the right of self-determination of the indigenous peoples of Assam.

**That means - 1. the right of national self-determination is not recognized in the Indian constitution.**
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 India. He claims that groups like the ULFA, United National Liberation Front, People's Liberation Army and few other organizations from the region

2. the Indian constitution and the other state systems are founded on the idea of "one nation state" other than the character of "Multi-nation State".

3. It does not empower any nation to adopt any eco-social and cultural planing or program in its own motherland.

4. It does not entrust any power to the national peoples to determine the demarcation of the area where a specific nation lives unaccompanied.

5. The constitution provides for a powerful centralised system (clause 352, 353, 365 ,360) to crush any movement organized by the national peoples to solve their problem by imposing "emergency" without any consent of the people's representatives.

6. In Delhi, the President of India and the Governor in Assam is supreme in power; the people's power is neglected.

7. In Assam, they are enforcing different laws and acts, those are discriminatory comparing with the rest of India. (IMDT Act, AFSPA 1958 Assam, Manipur etc.)

In addition, in 1962 the Government of India almost handed over Assam to China. On 21-11-1962 all the Indian soldiers left Assam. Jawaharlal Nehru said farewell to Assam (by his famous speech "My heart goes out to the people of Assam"). Even, at that time the "conducive pipes" of Burma Oil Company were lifted away to West Bengali, Bihari and Marwari peoples from Assam. Moreover, the indigenous peoples of Assam stayed here contemplating their destiny. After that, is there any legal right of India to rule Assam? However, shamelessly India again established their colonial rule after China declared unilateral ceasefire without encroaching on Assam. India once again re-established its colonial rule in Assam and resumed their colonial economic exploitation of Assam. And till today, the act of looting, and plundering of wealth of Assam is going on.

(http://www.oocities.org/capitolhill/congress/7434/history.htm)
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”\(^{20}\).

While on one hand the “mainland” has substantially undermined the social integration of the north eastern region in the national folds which was already struggling with underdevelopment and economic wretchedness, ULFA overturned the sense of marginalization to articulate an identity of the people of Assam that completely negates correlation with the “mainlanders”.

“… why they have chosen the path of the jungle?” Understanding the indices of violence
The South Asia Terrorism Portal (http://www.satp.org/) lists twenty nine inactive, thirteen active and two proscribed terrorist/insurgent groups in Assam\(^{21}\). The two proscribed groups are the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). These numbers are illustration of the mushrooming insurgent groups in the north eastern region of India. The complex grid of terrorism and violence in the region is still critical and has been intractable even after stringent and draconian anti and counter insurgency measures have been executed by the Centre to repeal the violent agitation. Extremism in the region has been only controlled temporarily at times but has never been completely eradicated. In the present day, fear and terror, both from the insurgents and from the anti insurgent activities, looms large in the minds of the common people. Yet, ULFA has never been dismissed as a band of anti-social goons by the local masses.

\(^{20}\) http://week.manoramaonline.com/Cgi-bin/MMOOnline.dll/portal/ep/theWeekContent.do?contentId=11534616&programId=1073755753&tabId=13&BV_ID=@@&categoryId=-176321

ULFA remained more or less dormant till the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, after the Assam movement was over. But soon after, it invaded the socio-political arena of Assam avowing that Assam movement was battling with the symptoms rather than the disease. The main cause of Assam’s woes according to the ULFA, was the “infected and decayed system” itself, from which the Assam movement was seeking remedy. In an attempt to rationalize the path of violence and armed agitation, ULFA subscribes the following:

If Assam would have been an independent country then we could have brought (about) progressive change by means of agitation or elections. But in the present context, if we agitate or participate in parliamentary politics then the government formed by us (will) have to work as per the Constitution of India and guidelines fixed by the Government… This system is prone to exploitation and corruption. This is proved by the gradual change in phase from the (All Assam) Students Union to the (Assam) Gana Parishad… Therefore, to create an exploitation-free society, our next step (must) be a national war of liberation… We have no alternative to arm revolution. (Verghese 1996: 57)

B.G. Verghese in his book India’s Northeast Resurgent Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development (1996) summarizes the issue of insurgency in the north eastern region as, “The answers lie in more rapid and innovative economic development and not in division of a limited cake into smaller and smaller portions. That would be to share poverty. Development is an essential though not sufficient consideration to break the vicious cycle”. He marks the causes of unrest in the region as, rapid social change resulting in a civilization gap, new value systems, land alienation by outsider or foreign immigrants, unemployment and unrequited aspirations. The stress on developmental agenda for ceasing violence has been a common thread in many of the contemporary writings. However, lack of development and poverty cannot be accepted as the only crisis and the only remedy for the region. Verghese in his book gives a detailed account of the network and support base ULFA created in carrying out its activities. He recounts that in 1986 first contacts were established with the Kachin Independent Army and the National
Socialist Council of Nagaland in Myanmar for training and arms. This entailed raising money for payments and gradual set in motion a train of extortion, kidnapping and demands for ransom that soon menaced a widening circle of traders, businessmen, tea gardens, both Indian and foreign-owned, and others. Simultaneously, public relations were promoted through a campaign of social welfare and vigilantism, helping villagers to build roads and flood embankments through self-help, and fighting social evils such as liquor, molestation of women, corruption, drug pushing and rhino-poaching. The police and lower administration had been infiltrated and were unable to intervene against as incipient parallel government, while the Robin Hood image attracted a measure of public sympathy. Pressures in Myanmar led ULFA a couple of years later to establish contacts with the ISI and Afghan mujahideen in Pakistan and still later with the Bangladesh Field Intelligence in Dhaka and, less successfully with the LTTE. As ULFA extremist activities rose, the Centre imposed a number of measures to curb the organization. ULFA attempt to blackmail and extort money from industrial houses and tea gardens incited the Centre to impose President’s rule in 1990, army was mounted and Operation Bajrang was carried out throughout the state. It was in 1990 that ULFA was declared a terrorist organization and was banned. This period also ensued a time of disturbance in the public life, the general masses of Assam got caught in between insurgency and counter-insurgency imbroglio. Military checks and searches became the order of the day. The normalcy of day to day life was effected as the army observed strict vigil at every nook and corner of the state.

22 An excerpt from Asia Watch report said:
“The Indian state of Assam, located south of Bhutan and east of Bangladesh, is geographically almost cut off from the rest of India, with its only physical link a narrow land corridor to West Bengal. Home to a number of tribes and ethnic groups, Assam has been the site of separatist movements and violent insurgencies since India's independence in 1947. The most serious has been the campaign waged by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) since 1979. In attempting to crush the ULFA organization and several other groups, the Indian government has launched counterinsurgency campaigns that have been fraught with widespread human rights violations. The Indian army has conducted massive search-and-arrest operations in thousands of villages in Assam. Many victims of abuses committed during these operations are civilians, often relatives or neighbors of young men.
The mass grave discovered by the army in the abandoned camps of the ULFA narrated a story of torture and death. Though the top brass fed to safer havens of Bangladesh, many member of the ULFA were nabbed by the army in Operation Bajrang. Meanwhile in the 1991 state assembly elections AGP was defeated and the Congress formed ministry. The defeat in many ways was the outcome of the general masses disenchantment with the student turned politicians of the AGP government who failed to provide a secured life to the public of Assam. No sooner did Congress assumed office than ULFA struck again, this time more blatantly. This led to the Centre to launch Operation Rhino in 1991. This second extensive anti-insurgency operation attained higher success compared to the first. ULFA’s chain of command was broken and many youth were caught in the dragnet. The public, press and the intelligentsia however were caught in the cross roads between their ideological responses to the ULFA and their aversion towards mundane violence.

suspected of militant sympathies. Villagers have been threatened, harassed, raped, assaulted and killed by soldiers attempting to frighten them into identifying suspected militants. Arbitrary arrest and lengthy detention of young men picked up in these periodic sweeps, or at random from their homes and from public places is common, and detainees of the armed forces are regularly subjected to severe beatings and torture. Deaths in custody have occurred as the result of torture, and in alleged encounters and escape attempts”. (“No End in Sight: Human Rights Violation in Assam”: April 1993:1-2 )

Fourteen officials and some others were taken hostage. The Government sought to negotiate their release and offered an amnesty to all detents taken during Operation Bajrang. It subsequently freed 400 of them pending reciprocal action by the underground. ULFA played false, liquidating some of the hostages and going on rampage. Within 11 weeks, as many as 166 persons were killed and at least 252 kidnapped. (Verghese 1996: 58)

Counter-insurgency grids were laid within 48 hours and a combination of surprise, saturation and pressure resulted in the quick capture of leading ULFA cadres and receipt of specific, actionable intelligence on the basis of which many others were caught in the net. As many as 431 hard core elements including 46 top leaders were nabbed along with 299 supporters and trainees within the space of some weeks. Sixteen ULFA camps were destroyed. Piles of arms ammunition, communication equipment, documents and photographs were seized. This established KIA, NSCN and LTTE links and the existence of sanctuaries in Bangladesh. Rs. 5 crores in cash and 32 gold bars had been recovered during Operation Bajrang. More was now discovered and there was some indication of money had been used to purchase arms at the rate of Rs. 50,000 for automatic weapons, Rs. 40,000 for pistols and Rs. 45,000 for VHF wireless sets. (Verghese 1996: 58-59)
The Congress Government led by Hiteshwar Saikia, by now sensing the nerve of the youth within the organization, lured them to shun the organization through double enticement of coaxing and coercion. The disillusioned and demoralized youth were offered tempting offers of clemency which led to the surrender of many members in the early 1990s.25

During the stringent army operations in the early 1990s, in an issue devoted to the ULFA stir, the editor of the Assamese magazine Aami (We) put forward his views as, “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” (Baruah 1999: 149). The sentiment that the ULFA is not an outsider but an integral part of Assam’s society has been widely shared.26

Insurgency and violence in Assam and in the other north eastern states of the country is not new. Since Independence this region has been marked by violent aggression from separatist insurgencies, fights between different militia factions, group riots, State’s high-handed responses through army operations and continuous violation of human rights from both the State and non-State agencies. This sustained violence has caused irreversible loss of life and property of the

25 In March 1992, Sunil Nath, publicity chief of the so-called pro-talk ULFA, led 3,500 youth overground. More followed, raising the number of those surrendering to over 4860 by the middle of 1995. These “surrendered ULFA” or SULFA were each offered a cash incentive of Rs. 50,000 and a soft loan of Rs. 2 lakhs for their rehabilitation. Some 40,000 availed the offer or were absorbed in jobs. (Verghese 1996: 59)

26 In 1990 Praful Bidwai writing on ULFA in the Times of India states that, “The truth however chilling is that ULFA is not a collection of rejects, lumpens and youth from the fringe of the society. Its presence looms large than life in Assam. Many people attributed almost magical qualities to the group. They really believe that ULFA in some fundamental sense invincible and many Assamese find it hard to think ill of ULFA”. (Bidwai 1990) The late Chief Minister of Assam who was indeed seen as the arch-enemy of the ULFA, hailing the surrender of members called it “the return of the boys” (Baruah 1999: 149)
Sanjib Baruah (1999: 149) evokes the popular cultural icon of Assam Bhupen Hazarika’s composition to elucidate that the ULFA’s position in the mainstream of Assamese public life. Hazarika’s lyrics to a song with a marital melody applauds bravery, sacrifice and heroism: I salute mother Assam and I dress up to go to war. I salute the river Luit (Brahmaputra) and offer puja to Goddess Kamakhya; with your blessings and an oath I am off to war”. Hazarika’s sense, according to Baruah echoes the Assamese sense of how things came to this; persuasion has failed and there are few alternatives but battle to avenge past wrongs.
civilians. Impediments of growth and development, restriction of foreign investment in the region and perpetual threat and fear in the minds of the common masses have been the subsequent ill-effects of the prolonged violence.

ULFA’s violence strategy includes selective terror, assassinations and taxation. Its emphasis on “scientific socialism” and “two-phase revolution” advocating “de-nationalization of ethnic communities” and promise to implement “scientific socialism to build Assamese society after the liberation from Indian colonial rule”, are substantiated by evoking the UN Charter:

According to the UN Charter of Human Rights, freedom and independent is basic human right. National self-determination rights are also fundamental and collective human rights. The occupation of Assam by colonial India, is directly the denial of the basic human rights and so is the breech of the UN Charter. India is continuing the rape, arson, torture, and above all the genocide in Assam by deploying occupation forces to continue their occupation ignoring all humanitarian appeal of the world community. (http://www.oocities.org/capitolhill/congress/7434/HRights.htm)

The use of violence then, for the ULFA, is a legitimate means to attain a legitimate goal.

The approach towards the presence and rise of violence in the region within the public discourse of Assam can be found in the words of eminent social scientist Hiren Gohain. According to him violence are a markers of a) alienation and disenchantment from the State and lack of guarantee in the Constitution of providing decent life and b) weakness of the Assamese national base that made it impossible for the ULFA to negotiate within the national paradigm:

The ULFA phenomenon is the product of the total alienation of Assamese youth from the Indian state. The vast majority of young people find in the Indian Constitution no guarantee of a right to a reasonably decent life. But the support for ULFA does not mean necessarily support for secession from India. The weakness of the Assamese national base has made it impossible for the ULFA to formulate a programme for national reconstruction. And in the past, it was easy for Congress (I) governments at the centre to find support among the conglomeration of ethnic groups and maintain a semi- Fascist regime by suppressing the Assamese with virtual army rule. Given this, a talk initiated by a genuinely democratic government sympathetically aware of the crisis of the Assamese nationality but capable of firmness when it degenerates into chauvinism is the best hope of solution to the problem posed by ULFA. (Hiren Gohain 1996: 2066)
Violence for the ULFA is a tool to address the national question— to assert and validate its form of national identity and repudiate the supposedly imposed “Indian” nationality.

**Conceptualization of the self— Framing of the identity by the ULFA**

The term “United” in United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is believed to be a deliberate adoption. ULFA, though emerged at the same point of time as the Assam movement, its appeal was to all *Axombaxi*— people living in Assam, rather than to the indigenous/citizens. In this way the ULFA distanced itself from the core issue of the Assam movement—the problem of illegal immigrants and engaged itself in what it believed to having plaguing Assam—the colonial rule of India. In a document meant for its cadres ULFA says it recognizes as *Axombaxi* anyone who, irrespective of his or her “prior identity, regards Assam as motherland, treats Assam’s problems as his or her own, embraces Assam’s culture and is prepared to fight for Assam’s future”. The same document states that ULFA would even consider changing the name *Axom* (Assam) or the term *Axomiya* (Assamese) “should it be necessary to do so in order to build revolutionary unity of the people who live in Assam” (Baruah 1999: 148). Detachment from “India” and unification with the north eastern states has been ULFA imagination of identity of Assam. It regards the breakup of Assam into several states right after the Independence as a symptom of Assam’s powerlessness. In May 1990 ULFA, the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), the United National Liberation Front of Manipur (UNLFM), and few Burmese insurgent organizations signed a memorandum of understanding. According to Indian military intelligence, the objective of these organizations was to establish an independent state comprising the north eastern states of India and north western Burma. They formed a common organization called the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF). It was noted in their agreement that the people living in north eastern India and north western Burma are of the same racial stock and that historically
and culturally they are set apart from the inhabitants of mainland India and Burma. The
governments, they said, have neglected these far-flung regions, “which must unite and fight their
war of independence” (Abidi 1990: 15-16). 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 1983:48). 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.

The ULFA sought to implement its idea of national identity by what Sanjib Baruah would
call “A localized regime crisis” (Baruah 1994). Apart from its envision of securing as
independent Assam, ULFA intervened in the social and cultural realm of Assam to “cleanse” it
from apparent corruption and from the influence of India. It conducted trials of people involved
in drugs and prostitution rings. It punished corrupt government officials and those neglecting
public responsibilities through extortion and blackmail, including government doctors who were
engaged in private medical practice or teachers employed in government schools who were
making money through private tuition at the expense of their classroom duties. ULFA raised
huge financial base through extortion from the tea companies and other business organizations
within Assam. Apart from money, ULFA made other demands to the industries including
employment of local youth, establishment of high schools and colleges at tea plantations,
commitment to basic needs of neighboring villages, moving corporate headquarters to Assam,
support for higher education for deserving children of tea workers, and improvement in the quality of food and housing provided to tea workers. ULFA made these demands on behalf of the “people of Assam”. It established itself in rural Assam through the *Jatiya Unnayan Parishad* (National Development Council), an organization that undertook public interest work like flooding and erosion, industrial pollution, illiteracy, land management ensuring its support base within the masses. ULFA cadres have provided relief to flood victims, and in the post-Ayodhya tensions between Hindus and Muslims, they intervened successfully to control violence in certain areas (Prabhakaran 1993: 9). In April 1990, on the eve of the Assamese new year celebration, *Bohag Bihu*, the ULFA issued a writ asking people not to corrupt the spirit of the traditional festival by playing Hindi film songs and disco music. In many colleges and universities it enforced the traditional dress code of *mekhela sador* for the women in place of “Indian” and western *salwar kameez* or *saree* and jeans respectively. Celebration of Independence and Republic Day in Assam had been banned by calling for Assam *bandh* every year without fail.

ULFA thus adorned itself the role of custodian of the interests of what it called “nationality” which bypassed the functions of mainstream organizations such as the All Assam Students Union (AASU) or *Axom Sahitya Sabha* (Assam literary society), which until now had been the harbingers of cultural identity. This nationality which sought to embark upon the grand unification of the various sections of people living in Assam, soon was challenged by groups such as the Bodos, Karbis, and Misings, but who are increasingly seeking autonomous political futures, in many, instances outside the framework of Assam. For them it was the nationality framed by the “artificial” Assamese that had historically impeded their freedom and growth and had pushed them to utter distress.
Disenchantment towards ULFA’S Xhunor Axom

A folk song that received immense popularity as Assam stepped into the 21st century was by popular Assamese singer Loknath Goswami- Moghai bule dholar maat dhimiki dhindhau, xhonor Axom nalage muk maatir xhojau27 (the traditional drummer reckons, I refute the dream of golden Assam, would till the soil to build my home28). This song which evokes the spirit of various communities living in Assam- Bodo, Rabha, Mising, Adivasi, tea garden communities etc. clearly undermines the enterprise of ULFA of installing “golden” Assam. The essence of the song encapsulates the aversion of the common masses towards violence, bloodshed and conflict in the enchanting dream of securing independence. This, in many ways, was the mood and attitude of the common people towards the persisting violence unleashed by the ULFA (and other organizations) which until now had enjoyed spoken and unspoken support from the locals. The local press, more often than not, had been sympathetic towards ULFA since its inception. Sanjib Baruah explains the general sympathetic attitude of the press as “the organization’s ability to stake out a place for itself in the space that constitutes the mainstream of Assamese public life” (Baruah 1994: 866). The general tendency was of concurrence if not outright support. Though many newspapers were critical of ULFA's avowed aim of independence and its violent methods, they inevitably published statements made by ULFA leaders in their editorials and other articles. ULFA’s position on various issues was, many times placed at par with the mainstream Assamese public life. National reporter, Kalpana Sharma (1990), expressed astonishment at ULFA's remarkably uninhibited style of expression. She found ULFA's presence to be “ubiquitous”. She referred to the role of a widely read Assamese newspaper- Budhbar (Wednesday), in spreading ULFA’s agenda. The newspaper designed a question and answer

27 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0e1h63vikE
28 Translation is mine.
column to engage its readers with the aims and activities of ULFA. According to the editor, they received 150 to 200 questions each week; from these the editor would select about 15 and the “ULFA boys” would come to his office and drop in their replies, which were duly published the following week. Even less sympathetic newspapers gave ample space and importance to ULFA’s positions on issues and engaged it in dialogue in their editorials and articles. The general concord of the masses with the ULFA could be felt by the grieve that spread at the death of its members. One of the deaths of ULFA members by army operations that created much public sympathy was of its commander-in-chief Hirokjyoti Mahanta in the early days of the organization. His death anniversary on 31 December was celebrated collectively and was mourned across the state. However, gradually this fervor was replaced by a feeling of indifference. The general masses grew averse of the violence and bloodshed that had become mundane and the general public were often caught in the cross fire between the ULFA and the State.

29 The local as well as national newspapers reported that he was killed after he was arrested and in army custody, while the army claimed that he was shot as he tried to escape. It is widely believed that Mahanta, against whom there were a number of murder and other charges, was killed because he was a major obstacle to the pursuit of negotiations between the government and the ULFA. He was conferred the status of martyr by the ULFA. A general sense of mourning and loss was spread across the state for a long time. Many new born children were named after him. (Personal experience)

30 Though the army and police were able to stop the observations in the capital cities of Guwahati and Dispur, there were several memorial services observed in other part of the states participated by large crowd.

31 “Recently, six Ulfa activists were killed by the security forces in Parulguri village in Netaipukhuri, some 15 kilometres from Sibsagar. Those killed included Pradip Mohan, a front-ranking Ulfa leader and a close confidant of Ulfa commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah. In what was easily one of the more serious encounters involving the ultras and the security forces, two school-boys also lost their lives in the crossfire which took place in the afternoon of June 2. Just a few months ago, the killing of so many Ulfa hardcores would have led to a wave of protests in the state, compelling the administration to come out with an explanation, however tenuous. But this incident, apart from being yet another 'success' of the security forces in fighting Ulfa terror-ism in the state, brought to light the growing internecine feud between those Ulfa cadres who have surrendered and those who have refused to give up arms. The popular reaction to the killings also seems to have brought to focus the diminishing appeal and the rather shrinking
ULFA, in the backdrop of massive combing operations and enticement of good life after the “golden handshake” of surrender, started losing the initial rigour by the late 1990s. Though the foundational basis of the uprising was to upturn the injustice and exploitation, the established left parties often ridiculed the ULFA for the latter’s ideological immaturity. ULFA did try to acquire ideological orientation through the trappings of a Marxist-Leninist system of ideas. They were reported to have received help from Naxalite splinter groups to some extent. However, even though ULFA tried to adapt Marxist ideas to the overriding goal of “liberating Assam from Indian imperialists”, its revolutionary activity largely confined to political assassinations, abductions for hefty ransoms, extortions and intimidations.

Around the same time sharp differences started arising among different sections of the organization on the issues of association with Bangladesh. The top leaders sought refuge and assistance in Bangladesh which did not go well with the some of the cadres. The members were also divided regarding their views about talks with the government of India. As the vision of securing independent Assam started to look difficult, more and more ULFA wished to give up arms and come to negotiation table; at one point this had been perceived as a “clever means employed by the capitalist group and the State of disarming ULFA” and of “creating rifts within its ranks”. In the middle of 1991 when the second military operation was at its heights, the ULFA was divided on the question of whether to enter into dialogues with the State. The difference of opinion led to identify certain member as “moderates” and some other as “extremists” within the organization (Budhbar 30 October 1991). As cadres were in deliberating

32 In a personal interview Jugal Kishor Mahanta, one of the key members of the Surrendered ULFA, narrated the unexpected move of the top brass to associate themselves with Bangladesh as a “breach of trust” which “defeated the very purpose of the revolution”. (Jugal Kishor Mahanta, Guwahati 27.03.2007)
on talks and surrender, on 22 July 1992, a full general body meeting was held in Bhutan. The meeting was attended by Paresh Barua, Arabinda Rajkhowa, Anup Chetiya and other ULFA top notch leaders. The delegates reached a unanimous decision that the members “will not fall into the trap laid by the Indian State through deceit and treachery in the name of discussion”. The attendees also decided to prepare a list of the cadres who were seeking to talks describing them as “counter revolutionaries” and resolved that the people would judge and punish them (Budhbar 29 April 1992). ULFA struck to its formulation of “Sovereignty and Independence of Assam” as the only matter of discussion and held that any discussion with the Indian State is possible in a third country decided by the United Nations.

Along the same time, ULFA resorted to sporadic bombing and other disruptive act to keep its presence felt. The loss was, many times than not, felt by the local underprivileged section of the people of Assam. The indigenous population now began to apprehend the fact that ULFA’s initial goal of securing the interest of the tormented people of Assam has been lost and they are now just a terrorist outfit. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samity (MASS), two public interest groups which had until now been supportive of the ULFA’s activities, started being vocal against the terror activities of ULFA. One of the most horrendous violent activities which substantially eroded the sympathy of the masses towards the outfit was the bombing at a school ground at Dhemaji which killed 17 people that included 10 school children on 15th August, Independence Day celebration in 2004. Though the initial response of ULFA was of denial, the masses were confirmed that it was the works of the outfit. It took ULFA 5 years to accept the responsibility for that act calling it the “biggest mistake of ULFA”.

In November 2004 the late Indira Goswami, Professor of the Delhi University and a respected litterateur of Assam in a formal letter to the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh offered to mediate talks between the Centre and the ULFA in order to end the long withstanding conflict in the state. Arabinda Rajkhowa also offered to come to the discussion table on the condition that the Government of India sends an official invitation for the talk. In an email to the local press Rajkhowa offered to constitute a plebiscite on the crucial issue of independence of Assam. Prof. Goswami met many legal advisors to seek the interpretation of “sovereignty” within the Indian Constitution, among them Soli Sorabjee, the Solicitor General of India. The Telegraph (Calcutta) reported that, “Though the Constitution leaves no room for negotiating the country’s sovereignty, legal experts here are of the opinion that the term itself has several connotations. There is economic sovereignty, for instance. It can be discussed and even granted. A state with greater economic freedom is possible”34. An eleven member People’s Consultative Group (PPG) was formed by the ULFA from the members of the civil society to mediate the talks between itself and the government in 200535. The PPG made substantive effort to mediate the talks between the ULFA and the Government of India. After a year and three rounds of talks between the PCG and the Centre, the Government announced a 15-day unilateral truce on 13 August 2006. Hope of long awaited peace was seen to be finally realizing. But as the talks derailed, the Centre revoked its military operations36. Assam again was gripped in erratic terror and bloodshed. For the people

34 www.telegraphindia.com/1050222/asp/frontpage/story_4408414.asp

35 Mamoni Raisom Goswami (Jnanpith Awardee writer), Reboti Phukan (Former footballer and childhood friend of Paresh Baruah), Arup Borborah (Lawyer), Lachit Bordoloi (Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti leader), Mukul Mahanta (Engineer), Ajit Bhuyan (Editor, Ajī), Haider Hussain (Editor, Asomiya Pratidin), Brajen Gogoi (Doctor), Dilip Patgiri (Adviser to the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad), Diganta Konwar (Journalist) and Hiranya Saikia (Sports organiser)
of Assam, ULFA now is an aging force. The euphoric goal of *Xhunor Axom* lost much of its shine after its linkages with the Pakistan came to light during the Kargil war when the ULFA was reported to side with the infiltrators. Also, the outfit is also suspected of maintaining bases in Bangladesh, illegal immigrants from which has been the bone of contention for the people of Assam. More and more, the public has come to look upon the ULFA as interest-driven, wanting to capitalize on its earlier “sanctified” image of fighting for Assam’s liberation for its own economic and political ends. It no longer captures the imagination of the masses. The PCG was dissolved in February 2011. The goal of peace and stability in Assam seems to be wanting of direction and intentions.

**Ethnicizing the Narrative of Injustice and Exploitation—ULFA’s Violent Rejoinder**

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36 Though no one is sure why such peace talks have inevitably failed, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, lists the following reasons for the failure of this particular peace initiative:

- The Army publicly expressed doubts (through a press statement issued by the Press Information Bureau's Defence Wing) about the ULFA's intentions to launch an offensive even while the so-called truce was on, suggesting that the Union government was talking in different voices.

- The ULFA sticking to its demand for release of five of its detained leaders saying their presence was needed for any decision on the issue of entering into talks with the Government.

- The ULFA refusing to name its team of negotiators.

- The Union government insisting on a written assurance from the ULFA that it was actually interested in talking peace with New Delhi.


37 The ULFA resorted to sporadic acts of violence: blowing up of oil pipelines, hurling grenades at the Guwahati Refinery, bombing of the high security Republic Day venue at Guwahati Judges Field. These attacks resulted in the deaths and injury of the common masses. On 22 January 2006, the ULFA carried out at least ten attacks on vital installations like oil installations, and gas pipelines. This severely crippled the supply of crude oil and natural gas in the state and the North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO) was forced to temporarily shutdown. ULFA also triggered an explosion in the main gas supplying pipeline of Assam Gas Company Limited (AGCL) during that time.
With the state getting tougher and the public turning against them, the militants in Assam are clearly on the
defensive today. Militancy in Assam is not a mere law and order problem but a reflection of a deeper
malaise affecting the whole society, neither can it be dubbed as radical politics of the marginalized
communities against hegemonizing forces. Politics of identity in Assam is basically trapped in the world of
appearances, fighting imaginary enemies, and drawing strength from prejudices and misconceptions of
groups about themselves and others. Without an understanding of the material and ideological roots that
gives birth to militancy, restoring peace in Assam would be an uphill task. (Srikanth 2000: 4117)

Present day India is blighted by various forms of armed conflicts; separatist movements, left-
wing extremism, religious fundamentalism. Different terms are used to address the various
agents of the conflicts. “Terrorist” for (supposedly) foreign miscreants, “Extremists” refers to
groups in the Naxal-affected areas and “Militants” refers to groups operating in Jammu and
Kashmir and in the Northeast. The ULFA though presently has reduced its terror activities to a
large extent, its presence nevertheless, threatens the peace of the region’s social landscape and
the complacence of its political structure.

ULFA: United Liberation Front of Assam: A Political Analysis (1994) by Samir Kumar
Das, is one of the rare academic monographs on the ULFA, where the author covers the political
presence of the outfit during the period from 1979 to 1991. This work proposes that ULFA has
brought to the fore a serious political critique which its adversaries (the Indian State) will find it
difficult to ignore or erase it away by force. In his analysis of the ULFA, he locates the problem
in the seamless and totalizing nationalism that Indian State subscribes to. According to him this
form of nationalism is “inappropriate” in two complementary ways; On the one hand, this is
what enables the state to ascend to the much-vaunted hegemonic position. On the other hand and
almost in the same vein, the hegemonic state, in the name of ostensibly advancing universality
and rationality, actually helps in disorienting the smaller cultural identity- groups and ethnic
minorities. Terming the ULFA upsurge as “ethnic problem”, he reiterates that ULFA is a
response not to the project of nation building, but to the Indian State's failure of building a	nation, “To us, ethnic problems are not only a consequence of the state’s project of building the
nation but also a response to the state’s abdication of the very project” (Das 1994: 8):

If we argue (as does Gramsci) that the nationalist ideology is crucial to a state's exercise of hegemony and
that the Indian state is one that abdicates the task of building it then we have to admit that we have a state
that can seldom be called hegemonic in character. A non-hegemonic state, in more positive terms, maybe
taken to mean, what we earlier designated as a minimal state. A minimal state, first of all, is one that has
already abdicated the task of building the nation. Secondly, it includes an institutionally loose-ended state.
Its institutions fail to produce the desired harmony. Indeed many of the state’s institutions are at
loggerheads with each other. Again, the strategies adopted by the state have not only been mutually
inconsistent but also at times not properly geared to the objective of nation-building. (Das 1994: 9)

The three interlocutors that we have marked earlier, based on which the ULFA has formulated its
demand for secession—exploitation, exclusion and India’s illegitimate authority over Assam’s
territory, sides with Das’s view that it is the State’s inability or withdrawal to constitute itself
into a nation that has insulated various sections of the population, to assert themselves for
dismembering from the State.

However, Das’s perception that ULFA is an “ethnic” uprising needs further analysis. Does ULFA represent the angst of a group that can be “ethnically” distinguished, if yes then
whose cause does it represent? If no then what are the contextual inadequacies that hinders it
from being called to represent any other political objective? The inability of the State to find a
solution of the critiques posed by the ULFA and the ULFA’s vehement rejection to find a
solution within the Constitution of India and demand for complete sovereignty to retract its
grievances of exploitation, exclusion and territorial subjugation forefronts the need to understand
the hindrances within the Constitutional structure in addressing the challenge.
The Indian federal system, which is apparently meant to divide power, has a clear distinction of the roles of the Centre and the states. A “concurrent list” enumerates shared powers such as civil and criminal law and planning; a “state list” enumerates state power such as education, agriculture and welfare; and a “union list” enumerates the centre’s lion share of the powers—defense and foreign affairs, income taxation, banking and other residual powers. In addition to the huge powers allotted to the centre through the union list, the vital is the power bestowed upon the Parliament to create new states, to alter boundaries of existing states and even abolish a state by ordinary legislative procedure without recourse to constitutional amendment (Ghai 2000: 57). Also under emergency powers the constitution allows the federal government to convert itself to a “unitary one”. Even when the Parliament is not functioning under emergency conditions, it can “make laws with respect to any matter falling in the state list for a temporary period”. Partha Chatterjee, in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* with the use of “thematic” and “problematic” reckons that there are inbuilt ambiguities and contradictions in the doctrines of nationalism in India. He argues that assertion of political possibilities condition the choice of a structure of justifications on one hand and on the other hand the justificatory structure itself conditions the identification of possibilities. In this process, some possibilities are emphasized, other erased, the marks of disjuncture are suppressed and the rational continuity of a progressive historical development is established.

The ULFA emergence and long existence indicates the presence of possibilities that emphasizes it perpetuation. Scholars have often criticized the myopic vision of the State in dealing with the matters related to the insurgency of north east India, which has been either been “developmental” or “national security” paradigm. As such, the response to the extreme insurgency has led to reorientation of the policies in the recent years. In 2001, a cabinet level
Department for Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER) to fast track the economic development of the region. The north east India has risen to be the only region in the country whose development is a mandate of the national government. Together with this an industrial policy has been put to place that provides tax incentives to invest in this region. The Asian Car Rally in 2004 was to showcase the north east region as a “gateway to Asia” in the line of “Look East Policy”. Yet the existence of insurgency reckons that the malaise is far deep and cannot be redeemed by interim developmental actions.

The emerging difference of opinion between the ULFA on one side, and the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) on the other, regarding the bona fide benefactor of interest opens up another layer of understanding of the complex situation of insurgency in Assam. The two organizations have recently started war of words against the ULFA for its pro-Bangladesh stand. In what looked like a desperate bid to shed out of its pro-Bangladeshi stand, ULFA’s commander-in chief Paresh Barua came up with a surprising stance saying that “any person, except those from the Northeast, who had entered Assam after 1947 should be regarded as a foreigner”. The comment on the foreigner issue did not go well with the AASU and the AJYCP which have since the Assam movement been the custodian of the issue of illegal immigrants in Assam. The AASU has said that the 1971 cut-off year for detection and expulsion of illegal Bangladeshi migrants was reached after consultations with a cross-section of the Assamese society before the Assam Accord was signed in 1985, which ended the anti-foreigner agitation. ULFA’s perception of regarding anyone (other than the north eastern) as foreigners regarded the rest of Indians and Bangladeshis alike whereas AASU’s insistence of detection of the Bangladeshi immigrants foregrounds: a) “Foreigners” are
impending danger in Assam and b) perception of the “foreigner” is the crucial arbiter in one’s imagination of the integration with the nation.

Commenting on the decline of ULFA along the years, in his later writing, Samir Kumar Das states that:

“If ULFA appears to have deserted the critique (or the ‘cause’) it had produced and so fervently brought to the fore over the years, its adversaries have squarely to be blamed for making it desert what once was so dear to it. As the critique deserts itself, ULFA does not make itself felt any longer through the power of a discourse. It is thus forced to clutch on to various non-discursive forms of power. The political critique per se has not lost its validity. It has only outlived one of its most powerful agents”. 

(http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume13/Article5.htm)

ULFA has defined the concept of the “Assamese” (Axomiya) as “a people of all communities, the mixture of people who are determined to work for all-round progress of Assam”. This definition of the people does remain restricted to those whose mother tongue is Assamese. In this description, the immigrants from Bangladesh are considered as “an indispensable part” of the revised notion of Axomiya. ULFA has been accused of having made this turnaround at the instance of its operational requirement of securing a safe haven in Bangladesh, which has been believed to have converted to a space from where the outfit can mastermind and also “hide” from the Indian security forces. Fear is being expressed from various quarters of Assam’s public sphere that the dream of a “Xhunor Axom” (Golden Assam) through independence from India, may soon turn into a nightmare of a “Brihat Bangla” (Greater Bengal), if the ULFA continues its undertakings. The present form of ULFA as a mere terror tactic marks the transformation of ULFA’s ideology from an end into a mere means.
Conclusion

The ULFA for its framing of the “national” identity of the people north east India adopted the available discursive perception about their identity and origin. The idea that the people of the region are distinct and different from rest of the country has been the rallying point of the ULFA for the demand of secession. This idea stems from the fact that the region is perceived as “exotic” and the people “alien”. The colonial discourse of lending a fragmented notion about this region plays its part even till date.