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## Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency Operations: Conflicts between the United Liberation Front of Asom and the State

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**ABSTRACT:** *There has been a rise of insurgent activities and regional movements in northeast India, especially in the states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Manipur. According to a 2006 count, there are as many as 109 armed rebel groups in the region. Most of these organizations demand independent state status or autonomy. Assam has been a hot bed of militancy for almost four decades. One of the major militant groups in Assam is United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) formed on April 7, 1979 with the aim to establish a sovereign state of Assam through armed struggle. The present study, from the sociology of law perspective, is an attempt to examine the socio political background of the genesis of ULFA insurgency, the State's responses to ULFA insurgency in the light of two major counter insurgency operations, and the impact of counter insurgency operations on the society from different stakeholders' perspectives. The study is based on two highly ULFA-infested districts of Assam, viz. Tinsukia and Dibrugarh. In-depth personal interviews with 60 respondents ranging from political leaders, academicians, journalists, ULFA leaders, police officers, victims and villagers. Despite counter-insurgency operations by the State, ULFA is still a force to reckon with. Though thousands of cadres were arrested, surrendered, lost their lives, ULFA is still in a position to strike. Therefore, this study is an attempt to make an in-depth study and assess the efficacy of the military operations and to find out plausible alternative paradigms to the problem.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Insurgency, Autonomy, Conflict, Northeast, Militancy, ULFA.*

### 1.INTRODUCTION

Insurgency is an armed struggle by a group of dissatisfied people against a legitimate government of the state, normally characterised by the presence of a 'Violent Non-State Actor' against the state. Such struggles often involve unconventional warfare, wherein the weaker organizations attempt to use strategies and tactics to offset deficiency in quantity and quality. The manifestations of insurgency are spread across the domains of militancy, terrorism, guerilla warfare, low intensity conflict and proxy war.

Today, insurgency is at the centre stage of security concerns of India. The situation in Jammu and Kashmir and the North-Eastern states have been witness to a procrastinated array of activities. The cross border linkages of insurgent groups and the new paradigms of threat from terrorist organisations are formidable challenges.

Encountering insurgency as a part of asymmetric or sub conventional warfare on a low intensity conflict grid calls for dynamic responses which no longer hover around any fixed doctrine.

In the post independence period, the part of development, which began under British, perpetuated uneven development. The North-East lagged behind in development in comparison to the mainland of India.

Assam's neglect and discrimination against her by the central government has always been raised in different platforms by the political parties as well students unions and non-political organizations.

The continued underdevelopment condition of this region has induced many political outfits to clamour for rights of self determination and even sovereignty. It can be said that the revolutionary organisations of this region took to the path of struggle and insurgency because of this historic legacy.

United Liberation Front of Assam, a major insurgent group was formed on April 1979 with the objective of establishing a sovereign Assam State through armed struggle. In 1990, ULFA was declared unlawful and an army operation first of its kind codenamed 'Operation Bajrang' was launched against it. This operation was not well planned and lacked co-ordination among different agencies and failed to cause any loss to the outfit. Again in 1991, the second military operation, operation Rhino was launched. The operation was better planned with proper co-ordination among the security agencies and intelligence agencies. This operation was successful.

## II. OVERVIEW

Ever since the British withdrawal from South Asia in 1947, India's Northeast has been scarred by sustained separatist insurgencies, mass agitations, ethnic riots and heavy-handed state response resulting in continuous bloodletting. The land-locked region, which is linked to the Indian mainland by the 22 km wide Siliguri corridor in northern Bengal, borders of Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China's Tibet Autonomous Region and Nepal is not too far away. Located in a volatile neighbourhood as it were, India's Northeast has witnessed, since the 1950s, large-scale insurgent violence directed against Indian security forces and communities from 'mainland' Indian states, but it has also witnessed frequent fighting between different ethnic militias. As a result, the Indian federal government and those governing the states in the Northeast have deployed large formations of regular army, federal paramilitary forces and the state armed police for counter-insurgency operations.

The inevitable militarization of the region and the murky 'covert operations' has been accompanied by rampant human rights violations due to unrestrained use of terror by both state forces and rebel factions. Extra-judicial killings accompanied by rampant human rights violations due to the unrestrained use of terror by both state forces and rebel factions. Extra-judicial killings, ethnic cleansing and large-scale massacres followed by substantial internal displacement – India's northeast has witnessed it all.

### Rationale for the Topic:

Northeast India owes its geographical distinctiveness in relation to the Indian "mainland" to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. But as an official Indian category it dates from 1971 following a radical reorganization of internal boundaries and creation of new states. The region is connected with the rest of India through a narrow corridor, which is approximately 33 kilometres wide on the eastern side and 21 kilometres wide on the western side. This constitutes barely one per cent of the boundaries of the region, while the remaining 99 per cent of its boundaries are international – with China's Tibet region to the north, Bangladesh to the southwest, Bhutan to the northwest and Burma or Myanmar to the east.

The present study assumes greater significance in the context of the questions concerning Centre versus the State, fluidity of identities, internal security, migration and geopolitical location. Putting it succinctly, the emergence of ULFA in 1979/80 that did not comply with the Indian State, and correspondingly the Indian State's responses through the Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino to the ULFA activities constitute the core of the thesis.

## III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Saikia (2007) In his book "Frontier in Flames, North-East India in Turmoil, the author has studied on the 'insensitivity of the centre towards the North-East region. That even after sixty years of independence, the North-East has not quite attained the respect of an able partner in India's nation building enterprise. The author has criticized the government as when in January 2007 United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) targeting Hindi speaking people, there was wide spread demonstration; Assamese intellectuals, students and women came out in large numbers to protest, expressing solidarity with the victims. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks companies of paramilitary forces were hastened to Assam and ex-gratia payment to the deceased were announced with alacrity. Then legitimate questions were raised in Assam, "Where were these leaders when death stalked the N.C Hills and Karb-Anglong?"

Mukhim (2007) In her article "Turbulence in the Abode of Clouds; Militants Resurgence in Meghalaya", the author has examined the concern of the people of Meghalaya of neglect by the centre. That the issue of illegal migration into the North-East from erstwhile East Pakistan is viewed by the major political parties of the country irrespective of affiliation with indifference though the students bodies in the region, primarily North-East students organization and the All Assam Students Union were agitating on the issue. She opines that New Delhi must decide whether it seeks the genuine integration of the region with the rest of India.

Ram Mohan (2007) In his article "Lebensraum in the East; Illegal Migration from Bangladesh" the author has studied about the migration to India before independence and after independence. In his study he has mentioned that after partition of India in 1947, unlike in the west, where almost entire Muslim population of Punjab went over to West Pakistan, very few Bengali Muslims migrated to East Pakistan. At any rate, almost all the Bengali Muslim peasants who had gone across to East Pakistan came back to Assam because of pressures on land in the country. The vacant river islands in the river Brahmaputra have been colonized by fresh wave of migrants.

Mentschel (2007) In his article "Red Chebons1 and Crimson Wars; The origins of Manipuri Insurrection", the author has studied the unique political and cultural entity of Manipur. He has studied on the rise of insurrection in Manipur in different phases. The first phase began when Indian Government dissolved Manipur state assembly and the elected Council of Ministers on October 1949. Following the dissolution of the assembly, Hijam Irabot Singh, a member of the dissolved council, went underground. He went to Burma and sought help from Burmese militants to protest against the merger and wage war.

Dai (2007) The author in his research article "Living the Untold Myth; Politics of Conflict in Arunachal Pradesh" has studied on the nexus between militants and politicians in the North-East. According to him the allegations about the nexus between militants and politicians in the North-East is not uncommon. The National Parties play out subtle and sinister games in the region to destabilize rival governments.

Gogoi (2007) The author in his article "Resurrection of Sunset Dream; ULFA and the Role of the State" has studied the ULFA militancy, its formation, motto, impact on the state and State response to ULFA. He has identified unemployment, geographical apartness and the continuing illegal migration from Bangladesh as the primary factors that set militancy in motion in the state. He has also cited pride in combination with neglect and deprivation by the Centre as a facilitating factor for the birth of militancy in Assam.

Das (2007) In the research article "Brigands of Fortune; The Economics of North-East Militancy, the author has studied how the militancy has unleashed untold violence and destruction in the North-East and affected the economy in several ways. The economic growth of the North-East has been stunted to a considerable extent by militant activities. In his study the author has examined the ways in which the economy in the region has been affected.

Bhatt (2009) In his book "Assam; Terrorism and the Demographic challenge", the author has thrown lights on how decades of illegal migration from erstwhile East Pakistan, later Bangladesh into Assam, eventually led to the bloody anti-foreigner agitation in 1983. He has discussed how initiated by the All Assam Student's Union(AASU), it produced a political

party namely Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and an armed wing called United Liberation front of Asom, which by late 1980s had penetrated all departments of the state government and developed into a deadly menace, extorting money and killing with impunity.

Dutta (2014) In his research article “Civil society’s Engagement with ULFA in Assam: A Historical Exploration”; the author has studied the reaction, appreciation, endorsement and critique in the civil society vis-a-vis the armed struggle launched by United Liberation Front of Assam since 1970 for an Independent Assam. He has observed that historically civil society in Assam has been a domain of manifestations grievances against the state, particularly against the Government of India. As a result, the civil society in Assam has almost been overtaken by the passion of ULFA, which steered armed struggle for Assam’s Independence.

Sarma and Singh (2017) In their research article “Resurgence of ULFA (I) in Assam: Implications for Internal Security” the authors have analysed the emergence of ULFA from the popular Assam Movement demanding creation of a sovereign socialist Assam from the Union of India, transforming to a criminal organization abandoning the ideological base.

Hazarika (2018) In his book ‘Strangers No More’, The author reflects the core issues facing the eight North-Eastern states of India. Politics, policy, law and disorders, violent uprisings and painful reconciliations, offence and defence, conservation and oppression, history and contemporary reality, stereotyping and breaking out of the mould, hope and despair. The first chapter of the book begins with a death, the killing of Thangojan Manorama Devi in Manipur that provoked a public outcry and forced the government of India, for the first time in its history, to review a national security law after a popular agitation.

Rehman (2019) in her book ‘Bullet Proof’- A Journalist’s Notebook on Reporting Conflict’ has studied on the Conflict in North-East India. During the study she realized that a journalist has to face wrath of both the state and the non-state actors. She has found the situation trickier because of draconian legislation like Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA), as AFSPA gives extraordinary powers and impunity to armed forces in areas declared as ‘disturbed’ She studied on ULFA, interviewed senior ULFA leaders, and did research on the organization. She has also studied on the Enigma Group or the ‘Demolition Squad’ of ULFA.

### Objectives of The Study:

The objectives of the present study are to:

- Examine the socioeconomic and geo-political context of the genesis of ULFA insurgency;
- Analyse the State’s responses to ULFA insurgency in the light of two major counterinsurgency operations, viz. the Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino;
- Understand the State’s counterinsurgency operations against the backdrop of the economy, culture and polity.

### IV. METHODOLOGY:

The present study is based on Tinsukia district of Assam, particularly three villages, viz. Lakhpathar, Saraipung and Laopati. The primary data include in-depth personal interviews with police officers (including the retired ones), academicians, journalists, ULFA leaders (including the surrendered ones) and villagers in Lakhpathar, Saraipung and Laopati in Tinsukia district of Assam. The secondary data include books, journals, archival material, and so on.

Tinsukia is an industrial town. It is situated 480 kilometres (298 mi) north-east of Guwahati and 84 kilometres (52 mi) away from the border with Arunachal Pradesh. Tinsukia is the site of Bengmara, which was originally known as Changmai Pathar. It was the capital of the Motok kingdom which was founded by Swargadeo Sarbananda Singha. Swargadeo Sarbananda Singha, known as Mezara, was a member of the erstwhile Chutia royal family and rose to become an able administrator. Mezara adopted the name Sarbananda Singha after he became the king. Swargadeo Sarbananda Singha introduced coins in his name and in Saka 1716 and 1717, he inscribed the title Swargadeo in the coins. According to the 2011 census, Tinsukia had a population of 126,389. Males constituted 55% of the population and females 45%. Tinsukia had an average literacy rate of 70.15%, higher than the national average of 64.84%; male literacy was 77.89%, and female literacy 63.54%. 13.29% of the population was under 6 years of age.

### Category of Respondents

Category of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Police Officers	09
Academicians	12
Journalists	13
ULFA	16
Villagers	21
1. Lakhpathar (7)	
2. Saraipung (7)	
3. Laopati (7)	
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>

### Thematic analysis :

- Under Developed Economy:** Under developed economy left the state underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure, employment and basic amenities till late nineties. Because of this, a section of the youth saw a ray of hope in the revolutionary acts of ULFA. This led a section of youth to joining in the organization.
- Mass Infiltration & Resultant Alienation:** Mass infiltration both from the neighboring Bangladesh and mainland India resulted into alienation of the ethnic communities from the rest of India. The encroachment of land and Culture by the immigrant population also paused a threat to the existence of the indigenous people of the state and a Section youths took up arms.
- Social And Monetary Benefits:** The Robin hood image of the cadres of the outfit in the rural areas attracted the local youths to join the organization. Moreover the money earned by the leaders/cadres of the outfit through extortion from businessmen lured some youths towards easy earning.



**Suggestions :**

1. Consistent Counter Insurgency Operations: Sustained operations against the insurgent group will make them run and surrender or come up for talks.
2. Use Of Advanced Technical Gadgets: Advanced technical gadgets artificial intelligence is useful in tracking down insurgent groups. Use of drones and cyber networks will result in neutralizing the insurgents.
3. Initiation Of Peace Process: simultaneously with counter insurgency operations the state has to initiate peace process with the organizational leadership level bring them to talks.
4. While conducting Counter-Insurgency operations against the militant group, the security forces must take measures to uphold human rights of the common people .This way they can earn the confidence and support of the people.

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