



EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS IN ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE UNITED LIBERATION FRONT OF ASSAM (ULFA)

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Extremism has become a subject of serious concern in the Northeast India in the last few decades. Assam, being a part of it, has also been known for extremism for quite some time. In the year 2007, 29 major incidents of violence had taken place in the state which involved the extremist outfits.¹ A regular occurrence of such incidents is believed to affect the process of development in the state. There are reports that after the series of violent incidents in early 2007, most of the development projects in the state had suffered as most of the officials and ministers were busy dealing with the law and order situation. Investors from outside the state are also supposed to have become reluctant to have investment in the state.²

Extremism being an advocacy of extreme measures implies deviating from prevailing political norms. In a country where democratic procedures are accepted norms, extremism means departure from modes of democratic functioning, going beyond the limit of the established institutions and their moral and ethical bases and as the institutions are not static and they do undergo modifications and changes with the passage of time; the concept of extremism also changes with the changes in the society.³

Scruton maintains that taking a political idea to its limits, regardless of 'unfortunate' repercussions, impracticalities, arguments, and feelings to the contrary, and with the intention not only to confront, but also to eliminate, opposition amounts to extremism. That would imply adoption of means to political ends which disregard accepted standards of conduct, in particular which would be viewed as showing disregard for the life, liberty and human rights of others.⁴ Extremism then might refer to a view that purports extreme change of any established system be it economic, political or social. Extremism would also stand for political radicalism of

¹ http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/data_sheets/majorincidents.htm (Website of South Asia Terrorism Portal, accessed on June28, 2008) .

² *The Assam Tribune*, 22.01.07.

³ Amiya K Samanta. (1984) *Left Extremist Movements in West Bengal: An Experiment in armed agrarian struggle*. Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited, p.1.

⁴ Roger Scruton. (Ed.) (1982) *A Dictionary of Political Thought*. London and Basingstroke: Macmillan, p.164.

any form or variety such as of the left or the right. If extremism means going beyond the limits of normative procedures which define the democratic political process, many of these procedural norms are themselves constantly redefined.

Historically, extremist movements are movements of disaffection. Occurring in periods of incipient change, they are employed by groups who feel that they have just been, or are about to be, deprived of something important, or to groups whose rising aspirations lead them to feel that they have always been deprived of something important they now want. Such deprivation is accompanied by political dislocation.

In India the term extremism was used extensively during the freedom struggle. The terms 'extremist' and 'moderate' referred to the two factions of the Indian National Congress, which became divided in the Surat session of Congress in 1907. Bal Gangadhar Tilak pointed out, that the two new words that came into existence with regard to Congress politics had a specific relation to time and therefore, would change with time.⁵ That the meaning of the term extremist is not a very static, but rather a flexible one, becomes quite clear when Tilak says "the extremists today will be moderates tomorrow..." Extremism therefore, at that time may be broadly defined as an active, militant and self reliant philosophy of life as well as a programme for action based upon the vital cultural traditions of the country.⁶

The history of extremism in Assam can be traced back to the early days of freedom struggle. In the post 1930s a section of youth being dissatisfied with the Congress leadership, preferred to adopt violence and militancy to pacifism.⁷ The activities of the extremists during freedom struggle did not seem to affect the life of the common man very much. However, today the activities of the extremist organizations seem to affect the lives of the people in various ways. This difference might however be related to the extent of extremist politics. While the extremist activities of the freedom struggle days were limited in extent and intensity, these seem to have increased now.

The major extremist groups which are functioning actively in Assam are United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Adivasi Cobra Force (ACF), Dima Halim Daogah (DHD), Hmar People's Convention Democracy (HPC-D), Black Widow, All Adivasi National Liberation Army, Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front and Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam. Besides, there are a number of inactive extremist groups in Assam such as Adivasi Security Force (ASF), All Assam Adivasi Suraksha Samiti (AAASS), Gorkha Tigers Force, Barak Valley Youth Liberation Front (BVYLF), Islamic Liberation Army of Assam (ILAA), Tiwa National Revolutionary Force (TNRFF), Rabha National Security Force (RNSF), Muslim Liberation Army (MLA), Muslim Tiger Force (MTF), Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam (MULFA), Muslim Volunteer Force (MVF) etc.⁸

Before attempting at the specific discourse of ULFA, it would be imperative to throw a few lights at the meaning of three extremist methods of operation viz. insurgency, separatist and secessionism. Insurgent, separatist and secessionist are three related terms. Insurgency is an extra – constitutional, compositively progressive and variegated struggle launched against the incumbent authority by the consciously mobilized sections of

⁵ Tilak's, speech cited in D. N. Vajpeyi. (1974) *The Extremist movement in India*. Allahbad: Chugh Publications, pp.V-VII.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ see *Political History of Assam, 1920-1939*, Vol. II, Arun Chandra Bhuyan, Sibopada De. (Ed.) (1978) Gauhati: Department for the Preparation of Political History of Assam, pp.271-81.

⁸ http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/index.htm (Website of South Asia Terrorism Portal, accessed on June28, 2008).

indigenous masses for the fulfillment of certain conceptual goals, manifesting emancipation.⁹ Separatism is resistance by a political entity to further incorporation or subordination within the larger political authority of which it is already a member.¹⁰ Secessionism, in contrast, is a narrower and more specific term referring to a demand for formal withdrawal from a central political authority by a member unit or units on the basis of a claim to independent sovereign status.¹¹ Separatist movements can become secessionist in course of time, and secessionist movements can revert to merely separatist movements. A secessionist movement by definition refers to claims and struggles to achieve sovereignty of its own in the form of independent statehood. From that point of view, from a northeastern perspective, the scope of the term extremism becomes broad enough to include the actions of all secessionist, separatist or insurgent groups. Not only that, it can also include actions of peoples which are not violent in nature but somehow do not fall in between the methods permitted to be employed by the constitution of India. Therefore, though in common parlance extremism is associated with violence, yet we can define extremism as such views or actions of a group of people with a political end; which are violent or non-violent in nature but which stand inconsistent with the prevailing norms that fix the limits of democratic code of conduct or which do not fall within the established political limits of a country. Such limits are often constitutional in nature. Newspaper reports and press releases issued by United Liberation Front of Asom show that it believes in violent extremism.

Extremism in northeast India has drawn the attention of a large number of scholars. Many of them support the 'colonial hinterland' theory as a cause for the rise of extremism. Tiltoma Misra¹² shows that Assam has become a colonial hinterland. In fact, this has become a major thesis of many extremist groups in the Northeast in propagating their cause.¹³ This thesis was further developed by Baruah¹⁴ when he contextualized "elites in a colonial hinterland". Baruah comments that it is but natural for the educated elites in Assam to stand against the exploitative nature of the ruling class in India and also oppose the people, with big brotherly attitude towards the local inhabitants, come to the state from mainland India. Udayon Misra¹⁵ credits ULFA of being the first insurgent outfit of the Northeast which focused effectively on the colonial thesis. Misra¹⁶ regards underdevelopment and relative deprivation syndrome as the major factors contributing to the sense of alienation and ultimately leading to insurgency. S K Chaube¹⁷ holds that the mainstream and its agents in India appear to be the 'internal colonisers' in the less fortunate regions. Amalendu Misra¹⁸ seems to follow the same line when he says that hegemonic control of the resources by a particular community and unequal distribution of wealth feed all the separatist movements in India. Samir Kumar Das shows ULFA's argument that India has only replaced the 'colonial rule' of Great Britain in Assam¹⁹; and that the internal colonialism that Assam has been

⁹ V. K. Anand. (1981) *Insurgency and Counter Insurgency: A Study of Modern Guerrilla Warfare*. New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications. cited in R. N. Prasad "Retrospection of Insurgency: A Conceptual Analysis" in B Pakem. (Ed.) (1997) *Insurgency In North - East India*, New Delhi: Omsons Publications, pp. 60-61.

¹⁰ Peter Lyon (1981), "Separatism and Secessionism in the Malaysian Realm, 1948-65", *The Politics of Separatism*, Collected Seminar Papers, No. 19, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London: University of London .p.69.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² See Tiltoma Misra "Assam: A Colonial Hinterland" *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 15, No. 32, August 9, 1980, pp. 1357-64 .

¹³ This is a thesis strongly propagated by ULFA. For a detailed discussion see Samir Kumar Das. (1994) *ULFA: United Liberation Front of Assam: A Political Analysis*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications.

¹⁴ See A. K. Baruah "Elites in a Colonial Hinterland" in B.L. Abbi (Ed.) (1984) *North-East Region: Problems and Prospects of Development* Chandigarh: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, pp. 322-28.

¹⁵ Udayon Misra.(2000) *The Periphery Strikes Back. Challenges to the Nation- State in Assam and Nagaland*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Rashtrapati Nivas. p144.

¹⁶ *ibid* , p.157.

¹⁷ S K Chaube "Insurgency in Northeast India : A Heretical View" in Pakem *op.cit.*, p,30.

¹⁸ Amalendu Misra "The Politics of Secessionist Conflict Management in India" *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol.22, No.2, August 2001, pp.49-68.

¹⁹ Das *op.cit.*, p.29.

subjected to is made in the context of India's capitalist socio-economic structure.²⁰ Colonial hinterland thesis thus remains a major argument in the study of extremism in the region.

The birth of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in 1979 marked the beginning of extremism in Assam. Operating in the background of the popular Assam agitation (led by the All Assam Students' Union or AASU against illegal influx from Bangladesh), the outfit's objective was to "liberate Assam through armed national liberation struggle from the clutches of the illegal occupation of India" and to "establish a sovereign independent Assam". While the Assam agitation was primarily a movement against the illegal Bangladeshi migrants in the State, the ULFA too raised similar concerns, which contributed to its popularity and acceptability among the common populace. The AASU-led agitation ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 and subsequently the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)—the regional political party that was formed by the AASU leadership who were a signatory to the Assam Accord—won the elections to form the government in Assam²¹.

Subsequent years witnessed ULFA's influence in the State reaching new heights. The outfit's military prowess is believed to have increased as a result of its ties with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), which aided it in terms of securing arms and providing training to its cadres. The breakdown of governance in Assam led to the declaration of President's Rule in the State and two army operations: Operation Bajrang (between November 27, 1990 and June 10, 1991) and Operation Rhino (between September 15, 1991 and January 13, 1992). The military offensives targeted the outfit and its facilities within Assam forcing its leadership to seek refuge in Bangladesh. ULFA was subsequently patronised by the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) of Bangladesh. The outfit also maintained camps in Bhutan till December 2003, when a Bhutanese military operation dislodged it from those camps. As result of these operations, about 650 militants, including a majority of ULFA cadres were neutralized. ULFA, however, has managed to survive and continues to launch periodic strikes in Assam, mostly from its facilities in the Sagaing division in Myanmar. In 2009, of course, there have been reports of the ULFA setting up a base in China's Yunnan province, established by the group's military chief Paresh Baruah²².

In addition to the ULFA insurgency, the largest plains tribes in the State, the Bodos, in the 1980s initiated a violent movement on issues such as dispossession of their tribal lands by Bengali and Assamese settlers, as well as apathy shown to the Bodo language and culture by the mainstream Assamese. In 1986, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) emerged with an avowed objective of an independent Bodo country. Parallely, the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) too launched a movement till February 1993 when the Bodo Accord was signed between the Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF) and the Union government. However, instead of bringing peace to the troubled area, a section of the BVF rejected the Accord and formed the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) in 1996. The BLT engaged in several violent acts, especially in the districts of western and northern Assam, particularly the Bodo heartland of Kokrajhar. Such activities of the BLT were brought to an end with the cease-fire agreement of March 29, 2000. Negotiations between the government and the militant outfit culminated in the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in December 2003. The NDFB in October 2004 announced a unilateral ceasefire. A formal ceasefire agreement between NDFB and the Government was signed on 25 May 2005.

²⁰ *Ibid* . p.34

²¹ Mehtabuddin Ahmed & Prosenjit Chowdhury (eds.) (1996) , *The Turbulent North East*, New Delhi: Ashkar Publications, , pp. 115-117.

²² <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/atsearch.asp> (accessed on 15th May 2010).

Apart from ULFA and the Bodo insurgency, Assam has been affected by insurgent movements initiated by Karbi and Dimasa tribes, the Adivasis and also the Islamists. Karbi and Dimasas have demanded autonomy for their homelands whereas the Adivasis have demanded greater recognition of their rights. Whereas the government has entered into ceasefire agreements with the Karbi insurgent outfit, the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and the Dimasa outfit, Dima Haram Daogah (DHD), splinters of both the outfits, the Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF) and the Black Widow (Dima Haram Daogah-Jewel Garlossa faction or DHD-J) have continued with their activities. The Islamist outfits, mainly the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA) with the assistance of the ISI of Pakistan has indulged in some acts of sabotage²³.

The insurgency scenario appeared to be somewhat stable in Assam during 2006 with a marginal decline in the insurgency related fatalities (total fatality including civilians, security forces and insurgents during 2005 was 254 while the number declined to 242 during 2006). But the number of fatalities remarkably escalated to 493 during 2007 and the state remained the most violent theatre of conflict in the Northeast²⁴.

In November 2007, the movement of the 28th battalion of ULFA (the group's most potent strike unit) was disrupted in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland – a territory used by the ULFA to travel between Assam and Myanmar. On November 11, the NSCN (IM) carried out an ambush on ULFA men in transit in Nagaland's Mon District and killed two ULFA cadres keeping two others as hostages thus restricting ULFA's movement. This was apparently the result of ULFA's warmed up relations with the NSCN (K) – the rival group of NSCN (IM). ULFA's earlier partner in terror, the NSCN (IM) refused any right of movement for ULFA cadres through Naga territory. However, ULFA's route to Bangladesh through Garo Hills of Meghalaya remained undisrupted.

During the early part of 2007, ULFA formed strategic alliances with small extremist groups such as the KLNLF and the AANLA. The violent drive carried out by the KLNLF against the Hindi-speaking trading community in the Karbi Anglong district in August 2007 was supported by the ULFA and, on several occasions ULFA cadres were directly involved in the attacks. Again, ULFA's support to AANLA, earlier a nascent outfit with about 50 cadres, has actually transformed it into a violent group with access to sophisticated arms and ammunitions.

On June 24, 2008, the Alfa and Charlie companies of the ULFA's Myanmar-based 28th battalion declared a unilateral ceasefire and came over-ground seeking a negotiated settlement to their three-decade-old problem. They declared that they would have no links with the ULFA and they would be called as the "pro-talk ULFA faction". They also gave up the demand for sovereignty or independence and said that they want to work towards achieving greater autonomy for Assam.

However, the Bravo Company, the sole remaining formation of the 28th battalion and the three other surviving battalions (27th battalion, 109th battalion and the 709th battalion) are still active. The turn of events within the ULFA, particularly the coming over-ground of the two units of the '28th battalion', has weakened the outfit to a great extent. The result was there for all to see—a sharp decline in the level of violence in the eastern districts of Tinsukia, Sivasagar and Nagaon. The ULFA's activities and areas of concentration were now restricted to the central and western parts of the state.

²³ Sajal Nag(1999) , *Nationalism, Separatism and Secessionism*, Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, p.26.

²⁴ [http:// www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org) (accessed on 17th May 2010).

The presence of Islamist militancy in Assam is mainly linked to illegal migration from Bangladesh and could be found in concentrations of migrant populations, mostly in Dhubri, Nagaon and Goalpara Districts. Between 1992 and 2009 (till July), 7,277 insurgency related fatalities were reported in Assam. During this period, 3,867 civilians and 778 security force personnel were killed in terrorist violence. On the other hand, the number of militants killed in Assam during the same period is 2,621. At present, there are eight militant outfits active in Assam. A total of 6,186 militants, including 1,165 ULFA members, surrendered during the period 2001 to June 2009²⁵.

Efforts at building peace in Assam have been made both at the government and the civil society level. Starting with the late 1980s, the government attempted to establish links with the ULFA through intermediaries. In 1992, the government even released some of the arrested ULFA leaders including its general secretary Anup Chetia to start a peace process. Chetia, however, jumped bail and went underground. The outfit, till the beginning of 2001, maintained a stand that peace talks with the government is possible only after three of its conditions are satisfied: talks should be outside India, under the supervision of the United Nations (UN) and that the dialogue must centre around its core demand of sovereignty of Assam. This was unacceptable to the Government. By 2005, however, ULFA had given up two of these conditions and demanded that talks must discuss the issue of Assam's sovereignty.

On September 8, 2005, the ULFA formed the People's Consultative Group (PCG), comprising 11 hand-picked people from various walks of life to prepare the ground-work for the eventual initiation of talks with the Union Government. The PCG held three rounds of dialogue with the government over a period of one year during which the government announced a six-week long ceasefire with the outfit. However, the process collapsed on 26 September 2006 with the truce being called off by the government as both sides refused to deviate from their positions—the ULFA wanting the release from prison of five of its detained leaders and the government insisting on a written communication that the outfit was indeed interested on talking peace. ULFA, in the meantime, had consolidated its position and carried on with its activities.

While the Government's peace efforts with the ULFA have been rather unproductive so far, it has succeeded in luring several other outfits in Assam into ceasefire agreements. For example, there are continuing ceasefire agreements with outfits such as the DHD (Dilip Nunisa), the UPDS, Adivasi Cobra Force (ACF) and the NDFB (Dhiren Boro group or the pro-talk group).

While the civil society groups in the State including the student's organisations such as AASU, Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chhatra Parishad (AJYCP), literary organisations including the Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS) have periodically attempted to get involved in the peace process, ULFA's recalcitrant attitude has created problems. Similarly, attempts by individuals including singer Bhupen Hazarika have not been acceptable to the outfit. Public organisations like the Assam Public Works (APW) have been largely seen as pro-government and their activities have been limited to creating public awareness against ULFA violence. On the other hand, ULFA propped up bodies like the PCG and the People's Committee for Peace Initiatives in Assam (PCIPIA) too have not been totally acceptable to the government for their pro-ULFA outlook. Contribution of the community-based organisations in bringing Bodo insurgency to a close, on the other hand, has been more successful. The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) and the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) have played crucial roles in bringing both the BLT and the NDFB to the negotiating table.

²⁵ [http:// www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org) (accessed on 19th May 2010)

On June 24, 2008 the Alfa and Charlie companies of ULFA announced ceasefire, igniting hope that peace efforts in the state would gain momentum. The leaders of the pro-talk faction of the ULFA, as they are now called, met with the intelligentsia and student bodies of the state to chart out a road map to usher in peace in Assam. They also held several meetings at various places in order to understand the general feeling among the common people and involve them in the peace process. They submitted a charter of demands to the Prime Minister in February 2009 demanding "full autonomy" to Assam within the constitutional framework. The charter says that full autonomy to the state can be the only solution to the 'Assam-India conflict' as it would remove the fear and insecurity from the minds of the indigenous people and provide safeguards to land, language, economy and right of self-determination²⁶.

However, of late, in spite of some resentment among the pro-talk faction of ULFA, as neither the state Government nor the Centre are coming forward to holding talks with them, the cadres of the faction are also getting restless, which was proven by the return of a few cadres of the pro-talk faction of ULFA back to the parent group of hardliners. The pro-talk ULFA faction is now trying to mobilize the organizations of the various communities and tribes in the State in order to form a common platform, which would carry forward the peace process. The entire scenario, however, took a U-turn with the arrests of several top brass of the outfit in the early part of this year including its Chairman and General Secretary were arrested in Bangladesh and were ultimately handed over to the Indian authority. This gave a new fillip and blood to the peace process in the state and the region as whole. The shadow of estranged Commander-in-Chief of the outfit, Paresh Baruah, still looms large at the horizon and might even affect the peace dialogue between the outfit and the Centre. The future is dark, gloomy and marked by uncertainty and confusion, but not without hope.

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²⁶ <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/atsearch.asp> (accessed on 19th May 24, 2010)

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