

HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASSAM: POLITICS OF VIOLENCE AND ULFA

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ABSTRACT:

Human rights violations take place in areas of insecurity and militarization. Violence and human rights violation are not monopolies of the state. The state has its own justifications for carrying out certain actions. The state views national security as its primary concern that forms the basis of their internal security and foreign policy. Armed struggles are considered an assault on the state. The ULFA, which has projected itself as the self-styled custodian of the Assamese interests, arrogated to itself the power of determining the culture of the community. It not only contributed to an escalation of violence in society but also wiped out the other possible alternatives and disciplines, the other possible cultural forms, with a single, pre-defined type. Politics of ULFA, which is an offshoot of Assam politics, falls in line with the politics of Bhindranwale, many differences notwithstanding. While Bhindranwale's messianic vision did not stop short of ruling the world, Assam's politics as manifested in ULFA seemed caught in a perplexing paradox of anti-statism and a cult of violence.

This chapter has looked into select aspects of Assam's politics and surveyed the long history of violence that has never left the state in entirety. Assam is thus one of those cases where democracy and violence have gone together, leading to ceaseless tragedies and wanton human rights violations. The existing democratic institutions have proved grossly insufficient to protect people's rights. The rise and weakening of the militant ULFA, and the subsequent securitization of the threat by the Indian state, has been largely responsible for the enormous crisis of human rights in Assam over three decades.

KEYWORDS: Human rights, violence, ULFA, national security, anti-statism, peoples' rights.

INTRODUCTION:

North-East India's troubled post-colonial history does not fit easily into a standard narrative of democracy in India. A young Assamese scholar, Sanjoy Barbora, describes it as 'politically convenient shorthand to gloss over complicated historical formation and dense loci of social unrest.'¹ This is because a standard narrative of democracy in India often overlooks the number of armed conflicts that shoulder in this frontier region. Among the North-Eastern states, Assam personifies complex dilemmas with no easy choices. Here, the costs of letting armed conflicts fester have been very high. As Vaclav Havel reminds us, societies pay an incalculable surcharge when following periods that history seems suspended the moment arrives for 'life and history to demand their due'.² Owing to the bewildering variety of its races and cultures, Assam has long been known as the symbol of India. Now that the fragility is being shattered by militant and ethnic stir and sub nationalist uprisings, she has also become a symbol of the crisis-ridden

¹ Subir Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery—Crisis of India's North-East*, Sage, New Delhi, 2009, p.1

² Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder--Understanding the politics of North-East India*, New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2005, p. vii

Indian polity. For these upsurges reflect not only a breakdown of the political process, but also a profound crisis in the economy and a radical confusion and uncertainty about the nature of the Indian state and its ideological foundations. Different sections feel that they have been left out in the cold by the process of development and have been prevented from having any say in the political decisions shaping their lives and therefore what is urgently required is a radical restructuring of the Indian state and its ideological foundations.

TEXT:

This is not to say that all these movements have an unadulterated democratic content. There are disturbing traces of chauvinism, aggressive intolerance and sectarian blindness in many of them.³ Assam personifies an India which can quickly become illiberal—ethnic violence, politically targeted violence by militant groups, state violence, and even violent crimes with a political subtext can all go on with relative impunity. The voice of human rights activists had become faint in the din of national security talk. Yet pan-Indian ideas – laws, the Constitution and public discourse – have profoundly shaped the sub national movement in Assam.⁴

According to Susanta K. Das, immigration remained one of the factors that contribute to Assam's above average growth rates. Assam's growth rate since 1951, he believed, is explained by three factors: an increase in the natural rate of increase, the influx of Hindu refugees and immigration from the rest of India.⁵ Afraid of the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh acquiring a dominant role in Assam's politics through the coming election at the end of 1979, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (Assam Peoples' Struggle Council), a coalition of regional, political, literary and cultural associations started a massive, anti-illegal migration movement. The leaders of the movement claimed that the number of illegal aliens was as high as 31 to 34 per cent of the state's total population. They, therefore, asked the central government to seal Assam's borders to prevent further inflow of migrants, to identify all illegal aliens and delete their names from the voters list and to postpone elections till this was done.

The Assam movement started in 1977. The issue of Assam's demographic transformation as a result of immigration returned to the state's political agenda with a vengeance. It ruptured carefully nurtured ethnic coalitions that were at the foundations of political stability in the state. It set the stage for a prolonged period of political turmoil. The Assam movement began in 1979 in Mangaldoi, a parliamentary constituency which is located in an area with a heavy concentration of East Bengali immigrants. It drew public attention because of a rapid expansion of the number of voters since the previous election two years earlier. The event followed reports of fresh large-scale illegal immigration from Bangladesh into the state.

On 8th June 1979 the All Assam Students' Union sponsored a 12-hour general strike (bandh) in the state to demand the 'detention, disenfranchisement and deportation' of foreigners. It was the first of a protracted series of protest actions. On 26th August 1979, the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) was formed as an ad-hoc coalition to coordinate a sustained state-wide movement. An unprecedented mass popular upsurge followed in the form of sit-ins, picketing in front of government offices, strikes and symbolic disobedience of the law.⁶ The slogan was "Bahiragatak Bahiskar Karak" i.e. expel the foreigners to keep Assam safe for the Assamese.

Assamese and tribals throughout the state, cutting across political affiliations and age groups, took to the streets to demand the ouster' of illegal migrants. 'Janata Curfews', civil disobedience programmes and oil blockades paralyzed the administration across the state as slogans like 'More Asom, jije kon, jije Asom, Mara kon, jai aai Asom' (if Assam dies, who will live, if Asom lives, none will die, long live mother Assam) and 'Jadi na hua Asomiya, Asom

³ 'Assam and the crisis of Indian democracy', *The Telegraph*, 7th February 1991

⁴ Sanjib Baruah, *India against itself – Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. xiv-xv.

⁵ Ibid., p. 51

⁶ Ibid., p. 192.

eri gusi joa' (if not an Assamese, please leave Assam and go) set the tenor of the agitation. Assamese students and youth groups coerced linguistic and religious minorities during the agitation and violent attacks were reported from all across Assam.⁷ History shows that grievances, especially in the socio-economic and political fields, have a distinct embryonic phase before erupting into full-blown agitations. The Asom movements also had its roots in the past. Launched in 1979, its main motive was to throw foreigners from Assam. By the time it started, credible reports appeared in the press of protesting Assamese being killed in firing by the security forces who had by then been pressed into service to re-establish law and order.⁸ This further agitated the common people of Assam and particularly the students. In October 1979, the anti-foreigners movement was formally launched. There is no denying that the agitation received unprecedented popular support that led one analyst, Mahesh Joshi to comment: 'Assam is fighting India's battle.'⁹

The agony of Assam was compounded by the constraints of partisan politics pursued by practically all major political parties of India which eventually necessitated the emergence of a non-political structure called the All Assam Students Union (ASSU). The New Delhi based bureaucracy; owing to its Euro-centric value bias took a holistic view of Assamese problem and failed to understand the nature of tribal differentiation in the region. This specifically means that those who are at the helm of affairs at New Delhi (often on virtue of being from different political and social systems) are cut off in their own country not only just by physical distance but also failure of communication. The failure is in two ways. The condescending aloofness of the city-dwellers towards the villagers is balanced by the latter's perennial distrust of the former as 'foreigners'.¹⁰

The agitation and the rumpus over the foreigners' issue completely paralyzed the administration and brought about the downfall of three popular governments in quick succession. Educational institutions were closed and all developmental activities came to a grinding halt. Industrial structures were dislocated and disrupted and plan allocations remained largely unutilized owing to the intensity of agitation. Tension was writ large everywhere. There was tension everywhere between the Assamese and the Bengalis, the Hindus and Muslims, and the tribal and non-tribal people. Slowly but most inexorably, the agitation expanded its area, and a large section of the Assamese population joined it.¹¹ The drive against the 'aliens' was joined by all kinds of people. The worst aspect was that it was getting into the hands of secessionist and the separatist elements. Violent elements too jumped into the fray.¹² The problem became acute due to the Centre's policy of ad-hocism, callousness and indifference to the problems of Assam.¹³

ASSAM POLITICS AND ULFA:

Extremist violence took birth in Assam in 1979 when the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was founded. It was founded on 7th April, 1979 at Sibsagar and upon the premises of historic Ranghar (entertainment house) built by the ancient Ahom Kings.¹⁴ It was founded by like-minded students who felt that India had failed the Assamese. All four were high-caste Hindus whose disillusionment caused them to seek support from Naga secessionists and then turn to Pakistan for help. At its birth, ULFA's ideologues believed that the "exploitation" of Assam could only be

⁷Subir Bhaumik, *n. 1*, p.118.

⁸ Shailesh K Singh, *n. 6*, p. 9

⁹ Subir Bhaumik, *n. 1*, p.118

¹⁰ For details, see, the essays in B L Abbi (ed.), *North-East Region: Problems and Prospects of Development*, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development Chandigarh, 1984

¹¹ Vibhuti Singh Shekhawat, *Assam: From Accord to ULFA*, New Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2007, pp. 70-71.

¹² *Ibid.* p.71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 72

¹⁴ Samir Kumar Das, Conflict and Peace in India's North-East: The Role of Civil Society, Washington, DC: East-West Center, *Policy Studies*, No 42, 2007 , p. 71

ended by a revolutionary purge of the existing “infected and decayed system”. ULFA leaders felt that there was no alternative except armed revolution to achieve their aims. It was formed with the purpose of liberating Assam through an “armed national liberation struggle from the clutches of the illegal occupation of India and to establish a sovereign independent Assam”.¹⁵ They differed in their analysis of the problems facing Assam from the leaders of the Asom Movement (who believed that the foreigners’ problem was the principle danger to Assam). ULFA believed that the central question was “the colonial rule of India”.¹⁶

In its preamble, the organization described the history of Assam which is termed ‘The pain and sorrow of Assam’ as, “All the industries, industrial products and the markets came under the control of the colonial ruling class. As a result, the strategy of annihilation of a nation began. Services, industries and the markets are packed with foreigners, deceiving the indigenous people. They have encouraged illegal migration of millions of Indian and non-Indian foreigners into Assam and rehabilitated them. This has turned the people of Assam into street beggars and a minority in their own country. They have fabricated a portion of the foreigners as the representative of indigenous people of Assam enthroning them at Delhi and Dispur as ‘Member of Parliament’ and ‘Member of Legislative Assembly’... Above all, the India ruling class is executing the strategy of ‘divide and destroy’ by instigating group conflict.”¹⁷

In one of the more sympathetic view of the ULFA enterprise, Samir Kumar Das addressed the politics of the ULFA in the light of the larger problem of the state’s abdication of the responsibility of building the nation in contemporary India.¹⁸ Commenting about the genesis of that ULFA, Das wrote “ULFA’s novelty lies in painting out ‘the agony of Assam is proportional to the prosperity of New Delhi. Thus, it goes a long way by arguing that ‘regional disparity is the effect of internal colonialism that New Delhi has established in India. The connection between ‘the agony of Assam’ and the prosperity of New Delhi that is pivotal to any thesis of internal colonialism was not brought in to the limelight before ULFA’s intervention. Secondly, ULFA strongly affirms that the ‘internal colonialism’ that Assam has been subjected to, is rooted in India’s ‘capitalist’ socio-economic structure...’”¹⁹

On the other hand, the state view of ULFA in terms of its manifestations and activities is quite different. One such widely circulated document, ‘Bleeding Assam: The Role of the ULFA’ asserts: “....the ULFA was formed by a set of disgruntled persons on April 7, 1979... While ULFA started its movement on an anti-immigrant plank, it changed course midway. You can’t have your money in another country and also preach a philosophy against the nationals of that country...”²⁰

Such official tracts speak of the ULFA modus operandi including: “propaganda aimed at embarrassing the elected government, Anchal Committees with the help of armed cadres carry out extortion, intimidation and abduction for ransom, use coercive influence over the print media to articulate ULFA’s interests, eliminate civilians refusing to toe ULFA’s line and among others detonate explosive devices on roads and culverts, causing the death of innocent

¹⁵ Dilip Gogoi, Quest for Swadhin Asom: Explaining Insurgency and Role of the State in Assam’. in Sudhir Kumar Singh and Dipankar Sengupta ed ‘*Insurgency in North-East: The role of Bangladesh*’, New Delhi : Authors Press, 2013., p. 46

¹⁶ Karan R Sawhny, ‘Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency’, *Peace Initiatives*, New Delhi, Vol. IV, No I and II, Jan-April 1998, p. 86

¹⁷. Dilip Gogoi, ‘Quest for Swadhin Asom: Explaining Insurgency and Role of the State in Assam’. in Sudhir Kumar Singh and Dipankar Sengupta ed ‘*Insurgency in North-East: The role of Bangladesh*’, New Delhi : Authors Press, 2013 pp 46-47

¹⁸ Samir Kumar Das, Conflict and Peace in India’s North-East: The Role of Civil Society, Washington, DC: East-West Center, *Policy Studies*, No 42, 2007 , p 106

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 34

²⁰ Cf. Bleeding Assam: The Role of the ULFA. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Cited in Jaideep Saikia, ‘Revolutionaries or Warlords-ULFA’s Organizational Profile’, *Faultlines*, New Delhi, July 2001, p.119

people and creating a fear psychosis".²¹ Though the ULFA was a militant fringe that could not take over the Assam movement, the Assam agitation was unique because, occasionally it did degenerate into chauvinistic and anti-left outbursts. For some, like historian Amalendu Guha, it was the expression of 'little nationalism turned chauvinist'.

In August 1979, on the advice of the outgoing Prime Minister, Charan Singh, the President of India dissolved the Lok Sabha and ordered fresh elections. Though the agitation started on a non-violent Gandhian note, with students participating in Ganasatyagrahas, eventually enormous amount of violence accompanied the movement. Assam was in a pool of blood. The following newspaper reports give a vivid reflection of a frightful period. For instance, *The Statesman* reported, "Police firing killed dozens and violent incidents took place in Upper Assam. Mr R Mitra, technical manager of Oil India, at Duliajan, was summoned by a false telephone call to come to the hospital to meet some injured persons. When his car reached the hospital gate, a violent mob smashed the car and stoned him to death."²²

More violence in Assam followed shortly. According to a press report, "All the evidence suggests that the explosions that damaged the radio transmitters and the oil pipeline to Gauhati and Barauni was the handiwork of saboteurs, the last outrage setting a new record for destructive zeal. The unrest in Assam was not lacking in violence before. Apart from suspicion of coercion in obtaining support for continued boycotts, hunger strikes, and satyagrahas, the movement had taken toll of 246 lives—about 70 explosions—losses from suspended production of fertilizers and oil alone amounted to a colossal Rs 1100 crores."²³ Another incident of violence took place when the Upper Assam commissioner was killed. The Commission of Upper Assam Division, Mr. E S Parthasarathi was killed and the Indian Oil Corporation Gauhati-Siliguri product pipeline between Sarupeta and Barpeta was damaged in two bomb blasts.²⁴

The years from 1979 to 1985 witnessed sustained political instability in the state. A report of an investigation committee of the Delhi-based Peoples Union for Civil Liberties gives a flavor of the early phase of the Assam movement. The Report chronicles how in a satyagraha (symbolic disobedience of the law) in November 1979 nearly 700,000 people in the city of Gauhati and an estimated two million people in the state as a whole courted arrest. "The Satyagraha" says the report "is fairly simple. People walk to the High Court in Gauhati or some such office in other towns, court arrest and are released a few hours later." The entire government machinery, said the report, was party to the Satyagraha. "The Government of Assam", a witness told the Committee, "is running the movement and the AASU is running the government."²⁵

The civil disobedience campaigns paralyzed all normal life for prolonged periods. For several years, there were repeated rounds of negotiations between the leaders of the movement and the central government, but no agreement could be reached. In December 1979, the civil disobedience campaign was extended to an economic blockade, and movement supporters stopped the flow of crude oil and plywood from Assam to the rest of the country. Support for the movement by officials, most of who were ethnic Assamese, and were often in charge of dealing with protest actions, kept confrontation between the state and the movement to a minimum. Even when the government adopted a tough posture, usually as a result of prodding by the central government, confrontations between the protesters and the police were avoided.

The demands of the movement got major support from Assamese intellectual and cultural life. For example, literary societies, cultural associations, newspapers, magazines, schools and college teachers' associations were actively supportive of the movement. Besides, the Assam movement had extremely broad support among the ethnic Assamese.

²¹ Cf. *Bleeding Assam: The Role of the ULFA*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Cited in Ibid., p. 120.

²² 'Ten feared killed in Assam-Army called out in Duliajan', *The Statesman*, 19th January, 1981.

²³ *The Statesman*, 14th February 1980.

²⁴ *The Hindu*, 7th April 1981.

²⁵ Sanjib Baruah, 'Immigration, Ethnic Conflict and Political turmoil—Assam, 1979-1985', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No 11, 1986, p. 1194. An account of the Report is available as "Magnitude of Assam Disorder: Report of PUCL Team", New Delhi : *Mainstream*, March 8, 1980, pp 18-21.

The campaign in which hundreds of thousands participated with displays of distinctive Assamese cultural and historical symbols, acquired the appearance of a state-wide cultural festival. There were, however, some distinguished ethnic Assamese intellectuals and political figures, mostly of the political left, who were opposed to the movement. There were also reports of terrorist attack on the opponents of the movement.²⁶

The leaders of the movement called for a boycott of the parliamentary elections of December 1979 unless the government agreed to remove the names of foreigners from the rolls. Potential candidates were asked not to contest elections until the electoral rolls were revised. Picketing of candidates by movement supporters led to confrontations with the police. As a result of the boycott, the election that returned Indira Gandhi to power nationally could be held only in two constituencies in Assam, located in the predominantly Bengali-speaking Cachar district. Elections had to be cancelled in twelve of Assam's fourteen parliamentary constituencies.²⁷

K.R Sundar Rajan observed in the Hindustan Times, "...The view from inside confirms one impression. The movement cannot be effectively defused through political manipulation or repressive force. The students spearheading it are no doubt immature and unaware of administrative and political complexities. But the belief in Delhi that everything will be alright if only they are 'isolated' is dangerous."²⁸ The inflexibility of New Delhi was clear. A newspaper reported, "Mrs. Gandhi has virtually ruled out discussion on a cut-off date to solve the foreign nationals' issue. She told the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and other organizers of the movement for expulsion of foreigners from the state." She said, "We should not have any cut-off date just now; we should start with the work and continue to talk. We will have a clearer picture of the problem and its magnitude."²⁹ The Prime Minister said that a solution to the problem of "immigrants" in Assam could be evolved peacefully. Some anti-nationals were active in Assam, fomenting trouble and trying to disintegrate the country's solidarity.³⁰

By May 1980 ethnic subgroups directly threatened by the demands of the movement began to form organizations to oppose these demands. In May 1980, a new organization, the All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU), which attempted to include both Muslim and Hindu East Bengali immigrant students, appeared on the scene to rival the AASU. While not disputing the seriousness of the problem of illegal immigration, the AAMSU demanded that all immigrants who came before 1971 are given citizenship status and that harassment against minorities be stopped. The AASU opposed the new organization, and in certain strong immigrant strongholds strike calls on days that AAMSU had called for protest demonstrations led to violent conflicts between AASU and AAMSU supporters. Apart from ethnic violence, a growing number of terrorist attacks on state officials and state property began to be reported in Assam.³¹

Eminent writer and analyst, T S Murthy said, "What is going on in Assam? The last parliamentary election had to be cancelled in all but two constituencies and it did seem cannot be held even now. The state has been disturbed for more than three years. All the ministers have been short-lived. President's Rule has gone on longer than anywhere else and there is talk of constitutional amendments to prolong it. Allegations of a foreign hand and secessionist forces have been tossed around. Hundreds of crores of rupees have been reported lost to the people because of the agitation. The Assam students and the Government are having formal meetings, informal meetings, bipartisan meetings and

²⁶ Sanjib Baruah, 'Immigration, Ethnic Conflict and Political turmoil—Assam, 1979-1985', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No. 11, 1986, p. 1194

²⁷ Ibid., p. 1195.

²⁸ *The Hindustan Times*, 4th April 1980.

²⁹ *The Statesman*, April 13, 1980

³⁰ *The Statesman*, May 12, 1980.

³¹ Sanjib Baruah, 'Immigration, Ethnic Conflict and Political turmoil—Assam, 1979-1985', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No. 11, 1986, p. 1196

tripartite meetings. Mediators and intermediaries, official and non-official, have been busy. The end result is one more state-wide bandh in December 1982.”³²

Between 1980 and 1982, there were 23 negotiating sessions between the movement leaders and the central government. It was reported that in the negotiations of October 1980, the government's position was that these immigrants should stay and the government would pay for their rehabilitation. There were also disagreements on the procedures to be used for the detection of aliens---that is, on the kind of documents to be relied upon to prove when a person had actually immigrated. The central government's effort to hold a constitutionally mandated election to the state assembly in 1983 led to its near total boycott, a complete breakdown of order and the worst killings since 1947 on the basis of tribal linguistic and communal identities. Nearly 3000 people died in state-wide violence. The election proved to be a complete failure with less than two per cent of the voters casting their votes in the constituencies with Assamese majority. The Congress party did form the government, but it held no legitimacy at all.

There were large scale atrocities before the elections too. In the months following the inauguration of the Taimur ministry, there was an increase in the incidence of violence. In April 1981, one of the state's highest ranking civil servants, who were identified with measures to tighten discipline among state government employees, was killed in a terrorist bomb attack. There were signs of tension in the Assamese ethnic coalition state coercion was double-edged device.³³ Besides beating and kicking, tortures in military camps included tying men's feet and then hanging them upside down, pouring hot water on them, stripping of their clothing, making them lick the floor, and detaining them in camps without food and water, became common.³⁴ Widespread atrocities were common. Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, winner of the 1980 'Janpath' Literary Award states, "Lately the state violence showed its ugly face nakedly. It took many forms, lathi-charge and firing on unarmed crowd, eclipse of civil liberties, inhuman treatment, groups arrests, application of NSO and pre-censorship. You have only to go to Assam to see this. The papers even cannot publish that news which was published by the national press. You have to go to the Guwahati Medical College Hospital to see the nature of CRPF brutality. Youth were main targets, Even women satyagrahis are not spared. The CRPF firing were aimed in most cases above the waist. I shall be happy, if the government changes its policy and learns to respect Satyagraha."³⁵

The choice of Gogoi as Chief Minister in January 1982 was an attempt to limit the damage. Gogoi, an ethnic Assamese, was Ahom by caste, which was another potential weak link in the Assamese ethnic coalition. While his government survived for only two months, the period was characterized by a somewhat reduced level of coercive actions and the release of the senior ethnic Assamese police official arrested by the Taimur government.

The President's Rule that was brought in after the collapse of the Gogoi government in March 1982 sought to cleanse the administration of officials in sympathy with the movement. There was increasing use of coercion. By January 1983 it was reported that the capital city of Gauhati and the towns of the Brahmaputra Valley were “virtually armed camps”. In view of the “presumed unreliability” of the state police forces, paramilitary forces were brought in from the centre and from other states. On the streets of the capital city, according to an Economic and Political Weekly editorial, there was “a premium in not being an Assamese,” because ethnic Assamese young men were likely to be

³² Vibhuti Singh Shekhawat, *Assam: From Accord to ULFA*, New Delhi : Anamika Publishers, 2007, pp 126-127.

³³ Sanjib Baruah, 'The Assam Movement' in T. K. Oomen (ed.) *Social Movements I-The Issues of identity*,; New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2010, p.117.

³⁴ Vibhuti Singh Shekhawat, *Assam: From Accord to ULFA*, New Delhi : Anamika Publishers, 2007, p.137.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 138.

arrested and beaten up. The Republic Day celebration of January 26, 1983, which was boycotted by movement supporters, turned into a blatant display of military muscle against its citizens.”³⁶

As the elections week drew perilously close to the finish, every community in Assam turned against the other community. The ethnic Assamese, the tribals and the immigrant Bengalis engaged themselves into an ethno-communal internecine strife which took a heavy toll of lives estimated at over 7000 persons, not to talk of immense loss of property. Assam’s image as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic secular state now lay shattered. There were lakhs of panic stricken villagers who fled their homes with whatever belongings they could collect. Worst of all, the state now seemed to be poised for a break-up along communal lines. .”³⁷

The carnage also changed the very nature of the Assamese problem. The state assembly election of February 1983 marked the breakdown of Assam’s framework of ethnic accommodation and of political order. Until the elections, the Assamese were agitating for intensive revision of electoral rolls but now all communities, the Assamese, the Bengalis and the tribals got segregated on ethnic-cum-linguistic lines and were also separated by chasms of anger and virulent hatred. Overnight a movement that was largely non-violent and secular for more than three years suddenly got transformed into a mob of blood thirsty marauders and the main issue of aliens and revision of rolls was swept aside by the pool of blood that engulfed the state.³⁸ Until now, the tribals had remained on the periphery of Assam’s politics, but the agitation and their own increasing awareness of their total isolation within the rapidly polarizing Assamese society infused in them a spirit of new militancy. The tribals were passive and docile. They suddenly became alert and active. Wallowing in abject misery and poverty, they felt that the resurgence of Assamese sub-nationalism would destroy the very warp of the tribal society.

The elections were held on February 14, 17 and 20, 1983. In the first round, the polling percentages was 10 in Assamese areas and 50 in Bengali-inhabited areas. Poll violence took a toll of 100 lives. In the second round voters’ turnout was ten to forty-five percent in Assamese and Bengali areas respectively. The loss of human lives rose to about 200 persons. A total of 288 booths involving 1, 90,000 voters went without poll. In Assamese speaking areas of Haja, Barma, Kamalpur, Undalguri, Bokakhat and Titabor the polling was extremely poor. The third and final round took place on February 20, 1983 amidst ghastly scenes, senseless macabre killing. Election-linked carnage rose to over 1000 persons including women and children is a hundred miles stretch of area in Mongaon sub-division in Nowgong district.³⁹

In areas where there were significant numbers of both pro-election and anti-election ethnic subgroups, violent confrontations took place. In a detailed investigative respect, the Indian journalist Arun Shourie called the violence a ‘Hobbesian war of all against all.’⁴⁰ The state was thus convulsed by violence. In Nellie, Lalung tribals killed Bengali Muslims; in the Kokrajhar sub-division, the Boro Kacharis fought Bengali Hindus and Muslims; in Goreswar and Khairabari, Sarani and Boro Kacharis fought Bengali Hindus; in Gohpur, Boros fought Assamese Hindus’, in Dhamaji and Jonai Mishing tribals fought Bengali Hindus and Muslims; in Samaguri Muslims killed Hindus; in Dhaila and Thekrbari again Muslims killed Hindus’, in Chaowlkhowa Chaporis Assamese Hindus and Muslims together killed Bengali Muslims. And each community that was a victim in one place was a predator in another.⁴¹

³⁶ Sanjib Baruah, ‘Immigration, Ethnic Conflict and Political turmoil—Assam, 1979-1985’, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No. 11, 1986, p. 1198.

³⁷ Vibhuti Singh Shekhwat, *Assam: From Accord to ULFA*, New Delhi : Anamika Publishers, 2007, p.167.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 167

³⁹ Ibid., p.169

⁴⁰ Sanjib Baruah, ‘Immigration, Ethnic Conflict and Political turmoil—Assam, 1979-1985’, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No. 11, 1986, p. 1199

⁴¹ Arun Shourie, “Assam Elections: Can Democracy Survive Them?” *India Today*, 31st May, 1983, p.57.

The worst-affected was Nellie where the orgy of human killing was reminiscent of the great Calcutta killing 1946 during partition riots. This time it was tribals versus Muslims. Over a lakh people were rendered homeless and the total killing during the poll period exceeded 7000 lives. Commenting upon this, *Times of India* wrote in its editorial entitled, "After the Carnage" that "After the great Calcutta killing in 1946, the Nellie killing in 1983, nothing so gruesome has disgraced India since post-partition riots...just as Calcutta is indelibly imprinted on their minds, so will Nellie be. Like the Calcutta massacre, the butchery in Nellie is a case apart. The Calcutta killing led to partition and holocaust that followed...Hopefully, Nellie will not set in motion a similar chain of events leading to another disaster. But how can one be sure in the face of the kind of incomprehension and incompetence that the country has been witnessing on the part of those who are in charge of its affairs?"⁴² The unprecedented butchery followed the government's horrendous political decision to impose the elections on Assam. As *The Times of India* categorically put it, "The Nellie tragedy is an outcome of the Union Government's decision to impose elections on Assam. In all probability, it would not have taken place if the authorities had not pressed ahead with the ill-conceived move even after daily clashes involving heavy loss of life had made it abundantly clear that the poll would not settle any issue, and, indeed, that it would greatly aggravate the situation...But they went ahead with elections. The results are therefore for all to see. Nellie floodlights the horror in Assam."⁴³

The Assamese people, fed up with violence obviously wanted peace. S.M Choudhuri, the Vice-Chancellor of Gauhati University said, "We do not want a permanent movement."⁴⁴ Jitendra Kumar Bhattacharya, the Janapith Award winning novelist, President of Assam Sahitya Sabha and Vice-President of Sahitya Academy bitterly complained about 'the eclipse of civil liberties' in Assam in the wake of acts of continued violence. According to the then Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia "the movement has died down or is about to die down. Many of the terrorists have surrendered and the new generation of students is simply not bothered about the agitation."⁴⁵

The entire state of Assam appeared to be in a state of seize. Breaking the chill of 18 months, negotiations were again resumed between the Assam agitators and the Central Government in June, 1984, the ice was broken by Union Cabinet Secretary C.R. Krishna swami Rao. The leaders came to Delhi for prolonged rounds of discussion. Indira Gandhi's handling of Assam problem was such that it followed a policy of long wait, indulged in guessing game and ignored all alarm signals. Rajiv Gandhi made untiring and sincere efforts to end the impasse through a political solution.⁴⁶

The Rajiv Gandhi government was able to sign an accord with the leaders of the movement on 15th August 1985. All those foreigners who had entered Assam between 1951 and 1961 were to be given full citizenship including the right to vote; those who had done after 1971 were to be deported; the entrants between 1961 and 1971 were to be denied voting rights for ten years but would enjoy all other rights of citizenship. A parallel package for the economic development of Assam, including a second oil refinery, a paper mill and an institute of technology, was also worked out. The central government also promised to provide 'legislative and administrative safeguards to protect the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.'

The ULFA came into its own in 1985, after the Assam Accord, when the newly formed Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), riding the crest of a popularity wave, swept to power. It changed track by concentrating on social problems. It banned blue films, liquor and drugs. Punishment ranged from ostracism to public flogging to killing. Policemen and government officials were forced to clean public places. Businessmen, including Surendra Paul, brother of Swaraj Paul were killed for 'non-Assamese activities' like not learning Assamese and denying jobs to the locals. The ULFA also

⁴² *Times of India*, New Delhi, December 15, 1983

⁴³ *India Today*, December 15, 1983, p. 52

⁴⁴ *India Today*, June 15, 1984, p49

⁴⁵ *India Today*, August 15, 1984, p. 123

⁴⁶ Vibhuti Singh Shekhawat, *Assam: From Accord to ULFA*, New Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2007, p. 175.

used a combination of selective terror, assassination and parallel taxation to build up an organizational base. It capitalized on its close connections with the AGP leadership and ministers to undermine the administration by hounding out officials identified with the state repression of the Congress regime.

The ULFA demonstrated its soaring popularity through some token activities like organizing political killings and lootings. What surprises us in the particularly brutal and shocking nature (with the obvious objective of drawing attention) of these acts during the period. ULFA's bid for demonstration centred on the immediate crucial issue of what it designated as 'illegal' elections of 1983. ULFA's attitude towards the elections was two-fold. On the one hand, the elections were held to be 'illegal' and believed to have exposed the 'mockery' of our electoral process. Hence, ULFA was committed to punish those who were associated in whatever way with holding them the government personnel, the contesting parties and the overenthusiastic voters who actually exercised their franchise, alike. On the other hand, ULFA was equally committed to punish those who, in the name of opposing elections, had masterminded the spate of communal riots all over Assam and thereby killed thousands of innocent civilians – may be Bangladeshis. ULFA claimed responsibility for murdering Utsavananda Goswami of Congress (I) for his alleged involvement in the fratricidal riots at Gohpur in 1983 and again in 1989. Similarly, it claimed responsibility for killing an IAS officer at Jorhat in 1983.

Apart from such individual killings, ULFA's daredevil dacoits were intended to have a high demonstration effect: "In May 1985, the attack by ULFA boys on the Silphukhri Branch of the United Commercial Bank in Guwahati spread the news of ULFA's presence to the whole of India".⁴⁷ The ULFA also started a big extortionist racket, demanding protection money from tea gardens. Most tea groups paid 1.5 to 2 million rupees and others paid even more. ULFA'S war chest swelled. They demanded huge sums from big companies such as Tata Tea, Macleod Russel, Macneil Major and Unilever. Refusal to comply with demands meant assassination. The victims were mostly Assamese, though the killings of some high-profile non-Assamese businessmen like Surendra Paul and Haralalka, politicians like United Minorities Front leader Kalipada Sen, police officials like the Dibrugarh police superintendent Daulant Singh Negi, received much more publicity. Having had several batches of its guerrillas trained by the Kachin Independent Army (KIA), the ULFA developed a force of some 1, 5000 fighters, all armed with weapons bought in Burma. The ULFA's military wing chief, Paresh Barua, later admitted that he had received Rs 30 lakh from the Chief Minister's Fund in 1986.⁴⁸ In an interview with Subir Bhaumik, broadcast on the BBC Bengali Service on 20th July 2008, Paresh Barua's spoke of ULFA's future and Indian strategy and even expressed a glimmer of hope for the ULFA in the changing context of Sino-Indian relations in view of India's growing 'strategic relationship' with the United States. Barua said a great conflict between China and India is in the offing and emphasized that 'smaller forces like ours will either be sandwiched in this conflict or will emerge independent.' It was however not clear whether the Chinese have already offered help to the ULFA).

During the first sub-stage (1985 –1987), ULFA basically intended to punish those who were found 'guilty' of having been associated with what it termed as 'illegal' elections of 1983 or masterminding the killings of innocent civilians in their wake and of committing 'social crimes' (like, seeing and showing of blue films, paying disrespect to the women and elderly people, brewing and drinking of liquor, human trafficking and narcotic trade etc.⁴⁹

ULFA's politics of retributions created its own repercussions. But, a noticeable feature of the retributions in this period was that the victims were predominantly chosen from amongst the businessmen per se but because they as businessmen remained oblivious to 'social responsibilities'. Why is it that the non-Assamese businessmen— mostly the

⁴⁷ Samir Kumar Das, Conflict and Peace in India's North-East: The Role of Civil Society, Washington, DC: East-West Center, *Policy Studies*, No 42, 200, pp. 72-73

⁴⁸Subir Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery—Crisis of India's North-East*, Sage, New Delhi, 2009, p. 120

⁴⁹ Samir Kumar Das, Conflict and Peace in India's North-East: The Role of Civil Society, Washington, DC: East-West Center, *Policy Studies*, No 42, 2007pp.73–74

Marwaris are to bear the brunt of ULFA punishment? It is to be noted that ULFA not only claimed responsibility in those cases but let the political victims know beforehand of the ‘charges’ against them. Seldom did the ULFA, however, give scope for mending their ways. It is necessary to note that the state’s attitude towards ULFA’s politics of retributions. Prafulla Mahanta, the then Chief Minister of Assam not only recognized ‘the difficulty that the administration faces’ in ‘acting swiftly’ against ULFA (because ‘the businessmen have not come to the Government or administration with specific complaints) but also acknowledges that the security measures at the command of his Government are extremely inadequate to protect as many as 700 and odd tea gardens in Assam and pleads helplessness.

ULFA was by no means a passive on-looker of the political events in Assam. It began silent consolidation and regrouping that had definitely received a jilt by the Operation Bajrang. It seemed that ULFA began to arm itself to the teeth not to frontally combat the Indian state but to continue the process of military preparedness that would one day pose a challenge to the credibility of the military potential of the Indian State. ULFA stand on the March – June 1991 elections in Assam was two-fold. On the one hand, ULFA made it clear that it would certainly abstain from them. It went one step further by promising that it will not make friends with those political parties that contest the elections and thereby pay allegiance to the country’s constitution. Arabinda Rajkhowa, General Secretary of ULFA, in a press statement warned against any propagandist attempt at associating ULFA with electoral politics and lashed out: “Over and above, none of the political parties that expresses obeisance to the Indian Constitution can ever be our friends.”⁵⁰ Siddhartha Phukan, one of the leading spokesmen argued: “We would never participate in elections under the Indian framework. Nor would we ask the people to boycott elections.”⁵¹

ULFA also announced that it would not interfere with the electoral process and extended “ceasefire” until further orders and also announced that it would “refrain from taking penal action” against national parties: “This is a sequel to the demands made by the people of Assam asking for peace and tranquility”, ULFA General Secretary, Anup Chetia said a press release.⁵² This was a sign of relief for all the national parties especially who viewed against the fact that Congress (I) had lost 25 party workers since President’s rule was imposed on 28th November, 1990 in the hands of ULFA.

ULFA struck immediately after Congress returned to power in 1991. The ULFA kidnapped 16 senior officials including Soviet coal engineer Sergei Gritchenko who was killed while trying to flee from the ULFA’s custody while an Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) engineer, T. Raju, was killed in crossfire between the police and the ULFA. Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia refused to budge after the ULFA refused ‘reasonable terms’ offered for releasing the abducted officials. The officials were finally released and a confident Saikia determined to avenge the slight, authorized heavy military action and started splitting the ULFA. Allegations that the Assam police was using the surrendered militants to hunt down their colleagues in the underground started mounting.⁵³

Successive military operations in 1990-1991(Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino) upset the ULFA and led to the first surrenders from the group in 1992. In Operation Bajrang” in Assam at least 12 people died in custody allegedly as a result of torture in the five-month long battle.⁵⁴ However, when the United Nations Human Rights Committee asked him about alleged cases of custodial deaths in March 1991, the then Attorney General of India said, “Deaths in custody are not on the rise”. Victims of death in custody were tortured during interrogation or when held during counter-insurgency operations in arms where armed opposition groups are active. In North-east India, most human rights violations are attributed to the army, particularly the Assam Rifles who report directly to the central government’s Home and Defence Ministers and to a lesser extent, to paramilitary forces and the police. The most

⁵⁰ Samir Kumar Das, Conflict and Peace in India’s North-East: The Role of Civil Society, Washington, DC: East-West Center, *Policy Studies*, No 42, 2007 , p. 81

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 82.

⁵² Samir Kumar Das, *Ibid.*

⁵³Subir Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery—Crisis of India’s North-East*, Sage, New Delhi, 2009, p.122

⁵⁴ Amnesty International Report, New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1993, p. 39.

serious abuses have been reported from the areas where the United Liberation Front of Assam is active. The latter, notably, have captured and even killed hostages. It has been banned. Torture and ill-treatment occurred routinely during counter-insurgency operations to flush out suspected members and supporters of these groups.

The response to a rising level of political violence, President's Rule was imposed in Assam as already mentioned. The state was declared a "disturbed area" and responsibility for maintaining order was given to the army. The ULFA was banned and a major counter-insurgency offensive—"Operation Bajrang"—was launched. During this campaign, widespread human rights violations were reported. According to the Amnesty International Report: "Every single day reports pour in from different parts of the state about army atrocities, including killings, torture, rape and harassment...The local newspapers are full of heart-rending reports of ordinary people being picked up by the army for no reason, women being raped and houses raided at uncanny hours."⁵⁵

CONCLUSION:

Regions of armed conflict have a heavy presence of security forces as well as armed non-state actors and consequently are marked by militarization. Human rights violations take place in areas of insecurity and militarization. According to recent reports from Assam, though violent actions by armed groups declined in 2003-2004, the number of killings went up in the same period.⁵⁶ In fact deaths of civilians, insurgents as well as security forces increased from 1994. From 1994 till 2010, 8660 civilians died in the North-East. With underground activities flourishing in Assam, the frequency and intensity of army atrocities multiplied manifold and the number of enforced or involuntary disappearances cases increased in the state. Many individuals 'disappeared' from the custody of the security forces in the 1990s. Such unlawful termination of individuals (no matter whether they were involved in unlawful activities or not) has been seen as deliberate terror tactics by the state.⁵⁷ The Assam State Human Rights Commission has received 6,500 complaints from 1993 to 2008, many of which are still pending.⁵⁸

There has been much concern about police and army officials who have been killed or injured when carrying out state duties in insurgent crossfire. Violence and human rights violation are not monopolies of the state. The state has its own justifications for carrying out certain actions. The state views national security as its primary concern that forms the basis of their internal security and foreign policy. Armed struggles are considered an assault on the state. The modern state is a Weberian construct, claiming legitimate right to violence and force to maintain its rule based on the consent of its citizens. As Walter Benjamin pointed out, "Law making is power making and to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence."⁵⁹ Personnel of the state in conflict zones have elements of risks built into the service or occupational hazards. When state servants are killed state honours them as martyrs. However, this is not enough to keep their morale high. Senior army officers are distressed by the repeated use of the Army in counter-insurgency operations (nearly 200,000 security forces personnel, including local police are presently deployed in the north-eastern states "in aid of the civil society") because of the natural reluctance of the soldiers to use force against their own people which soldiers plainly perceive is the result of the failures of the politicians.⁶⁰ In the words of the eminent Assamese intellectual, Prof. Hiren Gohain, "The Army's morale was eroded gradually under the temptation

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 24

⁵⁶ Anuradha M Chenoy and Kamal A Mitra Chenoy, *Maoist and Other Armed Conflicts*, New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2010, p. 143

⁵⁷ Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti, Where All They Have Gone?—A Report of Some of Disappearance Cases in Assam, August 1998). Source: <http://www.assam.org/node/2382>

⁵⁸ Anuradha M Chenoy and Kamal A Mitra Chenoy, *Maoist and Other Armed Conflicts*, New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2010, p. 146

⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in P. Demtz, (ed.), *Reflections, Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Berlin : Schocken, 1986, p. 295

⁶⁰ Karan R Sawhney, 'Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency', *Peace Initiatives*, New Delhi, Vol. IV, No I and II, Jan-April 1998, p. 90

and stresses of this unsavory business. And if it has ferreted out a number of ‘terrorists’ it has also profoundly antagonized the rural population with its drastic disregard for civil rights.”⁶¹

It is well known that the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 gave unfettered powers to security forces operating within a “Disturbed Area”—the term used to designate certain conflict regions for example Assam is one of them. In the Third National Convention on the Right to Information held in Shillong in 2011 army generals across the board argued that their men cannot operate in conflict regions with their hands tied. Their contention is that if they have to abide by normal laws such as the Criminal Procedure Code they would not be able to deter militants from subversive and violent activities. Civil society activists take the diametrically opposed viewpoint. For them, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act has become a foil in the hands of the security forces to operate with impunity.⁶²

An alternative opinion on the use of armed forces in counter insurgency operations comes from a highly respected analyst of the Indian Army’s role in counter-insurgency operations, Y. M Bammi, who noted in *The Pioneer*, (April 1998) that though the powers of the Armed Forces Act (Special Powers) gives full authority to the security forces to carry out searches and detain suspects without fear of legal action, troops take special precautions not to cause undue hardship. The security forces are assigned their tasks under grave and serious conditions where the normal law and order situation has failed. Such operations require special powers for the security forces as they deal with their own people using violence against the state. Security analysts have taken the stance that to investigate and deal with any violation of human rights involving members of armed forces, a senior retired army officer must be coopted as a member of the Commission at the state levels. Only then can the security forces operate without fear but within the laid down parameters.⁶³

The ULFA, which has projected itself as the self-styled custodian of the Assamese interests, arrogated to itself the power of determining the culture of the community. It not only contributed to an escalation of violence in society but also wiped out the other possible alternatives and disciplines, the other possible cultural forms, with a single, pre-defined type. ULFA’s complain that ‘the agony of Assam’ is proportional to the prosperity of New Delhi did win support of the masses for a while. However, as they became instruments of mindless violence and ruthless extortionists, their legitimacy was lost.⁶⁴ Politics of ULFA, which is an offshoot of Assam politics, falls in line with the politics of Bhindranwale, many differences notwithstanding. While Bhindranwale’s messianic vision did not stop short of ruling the world, Assam’s politics as manifested in ULFA seemed caught in a perplexing paradox of anti-statism and a cult of violence.⁶⁵ On the one hand it agreed that Assam could only mark the beginning of an all-round process of the liberation of India. On other hand, it believed that due to the variegated nature of the Indian society, it is impossible to liberate Bihar and Assam in the same way.⁶⁶

It now appears that ULFA and the Government has been sending signals at cross purposes. While for ULFA as well as the Citizens’ Forum, the real challenge was to arrive at a settlement – more than simple cessation of hostilities or what in strategic circles is known as ‘suspension of operations’, the Government thought in terms of getting ‘the majority of ULFA leaders’ to first ‘surrender’, agree to come forward and sit around the negotiating table. Bertil Lintner wrote after his visit to the Northeast: “The word here in Guwahati is that New Delhi may try to neutralize

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² *The Statesman*, March 21, 2011

⁶³ Karan R Sawhny, ‘Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency’, *Peace Initiatives*, New Delhi, Vol. IV, No I and II, Jan-April 1998, pp. 90-91

⁶⁴ Samir Kumar Das, Conflict and Peace in India’s North-East: The Role of Civil Society, Washington, DC: East-West Center, *Policy Studies*, No 42, 2007, p.34

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 6

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 107

ULFA with money and promises of representation in local administrations – as it has done with other separatist movements in India's north-eastern region.”⁶⁷

Assam is home to a vibrant ethnic nationalism that becomes violent from time to time when this nationalism is perceived as a threat from outsiders. In late 1970s, it became evident that a huge section of the illegal Bangladeshis in the state had become voters. The Assamese started retaliating against the outsiders, starting off a politically volatile situation. The insurgency took shape in order to protest against the alleged negligence by the Indian state that put the state's socio-political life into further turmoil. However, the recent spate of violence posed a simple question: why is that the Indian state still unable to resolve a problem that has continued for such a long period? Is 65 years not enough to set into force an administrative mechanism which can ensure a proper rule of and protect ordinary human lives? The latest riots yet again exposed the inefficiency of the Indian state machinery in plugging the gaping holes in the process of nation-building and also find answers to key border issues in the geographically sensitive north-eastern region. The threat perception of the native Assamese against the influx of illegal migrants is not exceptional. The rise of Islamic militancy and the forces of globalization have made the problem more complex. Bangladesh has failed to provide any hope of sustenance to its huge population, both economically and politically, and the spill-over effects have affected India. In such a situation, many political elements in India find it convenient to capitalize on the issue for electoral gains but at the cost of threatening the social fabric of unity.⁶⁸ New Delhi's Northeast policy has aggravated the situation. State polices have both created the context for ethnic violence and been a disincentive for a politics of accommodation.

The greatest challenge for the national leadership is to overcome the alienation of the Assamese people. The atmosphere has been vitiated with distrust and recruitment and the philosophy of hate disseminated by the advocates of violence. Peace and confidence building measures can be most effective if they involve the participation of popular mass leaders and people of known integrity and credibility, who enjoy the confidence of the Assamese people.

The insurgency has exhausted the Assamese people and left them yearning for peace. More than anything else, they want to get on with their lives with dignity and in peace. The insurgent groups claiming to be the messiahs of the people have often degenerated into warlords. The ULFA is a case in point. The ULFA's quest for Swadhin Asom has obviously been pushed to the remote background by the character of its current activities and associations, and its present agenda is at complete variance—indeed, appears to have nothing to do with the weighty ideologies, visions, principles and popular aspirations to which it ascribes its origins.⁶⁹ The tragedy of Assam is that the entire edifice of civil society institutions has crumbled as well.

This chapter has looked into select aspects of Assam's politics and surveyed the long history of violence that has never left the state in entirety. Assam is thus one of those cases where democracy and violence have gone together, leading to ceaseless tragedies and wanton human rights violations. The existing democratic institutions have proved grossly insufficient to protect people's rights. Thus, no matter which political party or combination of parties came to rule the state, the fate of some groups did not change. If the hallmark of a democratic political system is to manage and negotiate differences peacefully, Assam is a paradoxical case. It has practiced democracy like most states of the India, and yet, it has witnessed a consistent politics of violence alongside it. The case of Assam is complicated by the demographic heterogeneity of the state, with the ethnic Assamese of the plains seldom feeling democratically empowered amid a wide mélange of ethnic communities and tribes that have from time to time resisted the attempt to impose the dominance of the former. The large presence of Bengalis, together with their relatively easy socialization into the native language, has culturally threatened the Assamese and made them insecure in the face of continuous Bengali immigration across the international border with Bangladesh. The larger tribal groups, the Bodos in particular, have similarly felt culturally, economically and politically marginalized and often engaged in violence against other

⁶⁷ Bertil Lintner, 'ULFA: Rudderless Rebellions' in Look East, May, 2010, p. 21. Cited in Samir Kumar Das, *n. 117*.

⁶⁸ Shubham Ghosh, 'Roots of Assam violence are too deep for easy solutions.' Source: <http://news.oneindia.in/feature/2012/assam-riots-roots-too-deep-for-indian-state-1-1041175.html>

⁶⁹ Jaideep Saikia, 'Revolutionaries and Warlords: ULFA'S Organizational Profile', *Fault lines*, New Delhi, July 2001, p. 129

groups. The rise and weakening of the militant ULFA, and the subsequent securitization of the threat by the Indian state, has been largely responsible for the enormous crisis of human rights in Assam over three decades. This chapter thus reveals that there is little guarantee that normal institutions and practices of democracy will ipso facto secure human rights. The politics of numerical majoritarianism and the increasingly territorialized notions of power and governance eat into the vitals of a democratic process and paralyze it before draconian strategies of dominance and denial of the other, either by the militant groups or by the state. The conventional finding that civil societal groups target the violence of the state against and neglects the criminality of groups as against the opposite portrayal by the apologists of the state and security experts is also validated in the case of Assam. For this study, the most critical aspect remains the inefficacy of democratic institutions and practices to protect the rights of individuals and groups and create a credible buffer against large-scale violence.

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