

The Peace Process

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The armed conflict between the Indian government and the militant secessionist organization United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) has lasted more than three decades without a definitive settlement. Twelve thousand ULFA cadres including some 'suspected' members and eighteen thousand jawans of the army and security forces (not to speak of those missing) have lost their lives in the battles, skirmishes, ambushes, raids and search operations. The heavy and menacing presence of the army and security forces has led to atrocities, especially in the countryside, and political murders and extortions by the ULFA have again and again struck terror in the hearts of towns and plantations. What had been initially invoked as a rhetorical point—colonial occupation of Assam came close to reality, thanks to widespread use of torture and black acts like TADA, NSA, Armed Forces Special Powers Act and so on. At one time the ULFA was powerful enough to kidnap fourteen ministers of the Congress(I) ministry on the very day of their swearing-in ceremony. On the other hand the army behaved like an army of occupation over large tracts in the countryside for months together, and the police had assumed arbitrary powers to the detriment of civil liberties. Even more terrifying was the series of bombings by the ULFA and its allies in open markets, Independence Day celebrations and even the crowded grounds of courts of law. For more gory details and the general background interested readers might have a look at an article of this writer ("Chronicles of Violence and Terror") published in the EPW in 2007.

However from the beginning there has been a determined resistance by sections of the civil society to terror tactics of the ULFA, along with an attempt to understand sympathetically the causes of this explosive rebellion by a section of the youth. The government too used the carrot-and-stick approach to pacify them. Following the first major military operation ('Operation Bajrang') that took place against the ULFA headquarters at a place called Soraipung deep inside the forest and the capture of several top leaders, the Centre and the state Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia offered them a golden handshake in return for return to civilian life. Many succumbed to the lure and settled down, but as targets of wrath of their former compatriots, they came close to the security establishment, and were compelled to assist in detection of ULFA cadres, safe houses, loyal supporters, even in alleged atrocities against kith and kin of ULFA cadres, resulting in incurring the loathing of the common people. Some acquired the character of a dreaded contractors' Mafia after abandoning their cause. Some top leaders like Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, Vice-Chairman Pradeep Gogoi and General Secretary Anup Chetia escaped from police custody and took shelter in Bangladesh with the active connivance of the government there. Evidently the Centre and the state government had not taken seriously the claim of the ULFA that they represented the national aspirations of the Assamese people. The next phase coincided with a general sense of outrage and anger among the people of the state against the increasingly despotic role of the Congress government, which along with renegade ULFA leaders

(collectively and ungrammatically called Surrendered ULFA or SULFA) indulged in unprecedented corruption, plunder and misuse of law and order machinery for personal advantage. A groundswell of popular rage spearheaded by a largely independent media and supported by democratic public intellectuals was eventually harnessed by the wily AGP leader Prafulla Mahanta to win the election and form a government with Leftist support. The Congress even lost support of the solid minority vote-bank, largely represented by the United Minorities Front (UMF) [1]. Prafulla Mahanta faced from the beginning enormous difficulties in quelling the militant and armed wing of the Bodo ethnic movement, and his efforts to use force boomeranged with total alienation of the Bodos, partly instigated by the Congress. Then came the moment of reckoning with the ULFA wanting complete freedom of movement to carry on their activities in return for the support they reportedly gave Mahanta during the polls. Since they did not accept the framework of constitutional rule, they ran into a collision course with Mahanta with their campaign of recruitment and extortion, until Mahanta colluded with the Centre to unleash the next army offensive called "Operation Rhino". This time thanks to assistance from a more popular state government, better local intelligence, and better planning, the offensive did much greater damage to the ULFA bases and struck at vital parts of its organization. The political weakness of the ULFA came to light in the fact that there was not much popular resistance to this military blow except in certain pockets. The middle-class was now disenchanted and openly criticized the ULFA as 'terrorists'. AGP leaders were ambushed, one minister killed, another critically injured, and there was even an attempt on Prafulla Mahanta's life. The large urban and rural middle-class no longer felt sure that they were misguided patriots. Throughout, the ULFA stuck to the military line and did not care to support actively any popular struggle against the rulers who again took to the path of rampant plunder and repression. The genuine national aspirations of the Assamese people, fuelled by the frustrations of the proto-bourgeois middle-class, educated unemployment rising to thirteen lacs in a population of twenty million or so, the increasing stranglehold of outsider mercantile capital on the economy, the stagnation in subsistence agriculture and the sense of inferiority and alienation before the supercilious attitude of people from more advanced areas as well as the sense of political impotence in redressing such fundamental grievances, was diverted to military adventurism with a dressing of vague leftist ideology.

No mainstream political party addressed the question squarely. In fact most chose not to recognize it. Democratic critics were laughed out of court by opportunist middle-class intellectuals who fanned the flickers of unrest into a blaze of anger and hatred and obscured the distinction between friend and enemy. But there has always been a sneaking admiration for the youths who risked their lives for a 'national' cause. Hence, though shattered by every major offensive by the Indian army the ULFA rose every time from the ashes and replenished its dwindling ranks. However the joint and unexpected campaign by the Indian and the Royal Bhutan armies against them inside inaccessible terrain where the ULFA built up a huge fortress-like camp, with immense store of arms and ammunition and where hundreds were being trained for action in the plains of Assam-all with the collusion of the Bhutan government which had no power to challenge them with its meagre resources and which was content

to collect an enormous amount for the unofficial lease. Once the Government of India started twisting its arms hapless Bhutan had no option other than to play the jackal to the Indian tiger. Many top leaders were arrested, and some of the most dedicated and formidable commanders were last seen alive in captivity but have since been reported 'missing'. The last straw on the camel's back was the arrest and extradition of many of the remaining higher-echelon leaders from Bangladesh with Sheikh Hasina firmly in the saddle. The close new ties between America, India and Bangladesh now rule out a foreign sponsorship of this kind of freedom struggle.

When the leaders saw the writing on the wall they prepared to negotiate. A People's Consultative Group (PCG) was formed with members handpicked by Paresh Barua, the redoubtable Chief of the combat troops of the ULFA, to facilitate the process of negotiations. Barua and other leaders however made it clear that they were not going to be fobbed off by glamorous bribes, but the question of Assam's dependence/sovereignty/secession must be on the agenda. Dr Indira Goswami, the eminent author, arranged a meeting with the Prime Minister and it was attended by the seniormost officials of the Home Ministry. However, after some show of promise it fizzled out, and both sides hurled accusations against each other for the breakdown in talks.

POSTSCRIPT

The so-called mainstream media portrays Assam as a scene of uninterrupted mayhem, thuggery and violence, pushing into the shadows the foul politics that has brought about this situation. People outside do not know Assam had to agitate for a bridge across the Brahmaputra, for an oil refinery as a project of modern industry, and about thirty years back for a proper check on influx of foreigners. Frustration at the Centre's apathy and its imitation of the British policy of divide and rule, led to many untoward incidents, and eventually the emergence of an armed outfit to seek independence. The ULFA in its early reckless days committed grievous errors, and there was stout resistance to their crimes from certain sections of conscious citizens at very great risk to their lives. Unfortunately the GOI is given to looking at such developments from a narrow political angle, leading to a tangled situation—even today members of the civil society continue to be under surveillance of the IB and SB (Police).

To cut a long story short, after three major offensives by the army and a diplomatic rapprochement with Bangladesh, the ULFA which rose each time out of virtual rout, now shows a keen interest in talks for an honourable settlement on outstanding problems of the people of Assam and a permanent peace. An earlier attempt by a group called PCG to bring about a dialogue collapsed in mutual mistrust and recrimination. Hence a number of concerned and conscious citizens, troubled by the deterioration in civil life, thanks to unsettled state of affairs and powerful vested interests thriving on plunder of the treasury and rich natural resources, are cautiously making a fresh bid for resumption of talks. The jailed ULFA leaders who constitute the majority of the central committee of the ULFA have shown genuine interest in peace and settlement of basic issues through talks. A state-level convention, lasting ten hours and attended by 1500 delegates and participants who sat through it, confirmed the deep yearning among the people for peace and an honourable

settlement for the insurgents. While the ULFA had been guilty of serious errors and terrible misjudgements (which these citizens always condemned unequivocally), there is no question of dismissing them as a band of criminals. A political settlement is the need of the hour. But the mainstream media are blacking out this major event, and certain sections of the media under the thumb of the ruling party are hell-bent on discrediting every move by the leaders of the convention and creating confusion. But a series of resolutions demanding cease-fire, unconditional talks, release of jailed leaders to enable them to take a decision freely, and opposing the resumption of talks on flimsy legal technicalities have been adopted in the convention and further enriched and fine-tuned in a meeting of conveners on 4th April 2010. Copies will be sent to both sides and the people are firmly behind the move in spite of provocation of agents of vested interests. The GOI does not seem averse to talks, but it should think seriously in terms of meeting fundamental issues like alienation of the people rather than offering inane packages. The elections are round the corner and the Congress government in the state is understandably nervous about entry of the ULFA into the routine politics of the state. But it has no business to misinform and confuse people about the real situation here.

Notes :

1. UMF was formed in 1985. After the AGP rule, the minorities came back to the Congress fold. However the suspected and alleged Congress connivance at gunning down of 300 immigrant Muslim refugees in Bansbari camp by Bodo extremists again threw them into an alliance with AGP and the parliamentary Left.
[source : www-sanhati.com]