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Dream for Sovereignty in Assam: A study of ULFA

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Abstract:

United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) an important rebel group of Assam has been demanding sovereignty from the Indian Union since 1980s. During the first tenure of Asom Gana Parisad (AGP) government, ULFA had a strong position and support from the people of Assam for achieving sovereignty but presently their position is not so strong compare to that period. Now there are two faction of ULFA, one group under the leadership of Arabinda Rajkhoa conducting discussion with government of India and another group under the leadership of Paresh Baruah demanding sovereignty from Indian Union. But both the group is not so significant as well as important in present context. Though the Paresh Baruah faction are now involving in various issues of Assam such as saving Assamese culture by banning singing of Hindi song by Assamese singer during Bihu season and so on for getting relevance but their position is also not so strong in present day situation. So through this study an attempt has been to understand the genesis of the development of ULFA and their position for the demand of sovereignty in present day context.

Key Words: ULFA, Dream for sovereignty, Identity Preservation, Assamese, Assam

Introduction: Assam is located in the foothills of the Himalayas, is known as the gateway to Northeast India. The partition of the country had a major impact on Northeast India and in Assam. The Assam movement has its genesis in the illegal immigration of Bangladeshis, before the administration could settle down in its new environment in a make-shift temporary capital, the Assam agitation began in 1979 and soon, the Assam Accord – to end the anti-foreigners movement - was drafted and signed overnight on 14th August 1985. The ULFA was formed on April 7, 1979, in a meeting organised by six radical Assamese youth at the Rang Ghar, the famous amphitheatre of the Ahom royalty at Sibsagar. The ULFA first came into the limelight when it joined hands with the All Assam Student's Union (AASU) and All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) combine in enforcing the boycott of polls of 1983. ULFA carried out silent consolidation and maintained a low profile during the first few years of its formation. It shot into prominence by organizing exceptionally daring bank robberies, by initiating rural development works or by retributive killings and meting out summary justice, particularly in areas where the presence of the Indian State was only cosmetic. While secession from India was the declared objective, the

ULFA adopted an anti-foreigner stance to gain popular support base on the prevailing public sentiments at that time. In 1985, the outfit asserted its primary objective, 'to liberate Assam from Indian colonial rule' and form a 'Sovereign, Socialist Assam' through an armed struggle.¹

Genesis of the development of ULFA: In more than three decade of its existence, the ULFA has thrived on its foundational basis of articulating an idea of discrete peoplehood for and about the people of Assam, accentuating the question of economic deprivation by the Indian State to incur its demand for secession from India. It is ULFA's argument that India's failure to address and redress the deplorable economic condition of the people of Assam negates its sovereign power over Assam.

The United Liberation Front of Assam vehemently invaded the socio-political scene of Assam in the early 1980s with a series of political assassination and bank robberies, though it claims to have founded itself in the late 1970s. It is today a banned extremist group.

The organization of ULFA got more strengthened after 1984, especially after the coming to power of the regional AGP government, although the organization was known to be operating from 1979. It was from 1983 that ULFA was groping from one corner to the other in search of authentic ideology which could be acceptable to various communities. If we look at the composition of the orgainsation, it becomes clear that two or three communities have been dominating the leadership front- although its membership represents almost all the communities of Assam. Till today, Motok-Moran community is considered to be the strongest support base of ULFA.²

The genesis of ULFA can be traced to the AJYCP, a radical group, more systematic and active than the AASU. The AJYCP shuns the limelight and working silently-unlike the high profile AASU-does more for the youth of Assam than anyone actually cares to mention. As a matter of detail, Arabinda Rajkhowa, Pradip Gogoi and Anup Chetia had all worked for the AJYCP al some point of time or the other.³ The organization's central issues revolve around more power to the states, control over their resources and introduction dual citizenship. Needless to say the organization has been playing a pivotal role in devising a negotiated settlement between the government of India and ULFA.

The ULFA, as it is commonly known as, has been successful in acclaiming itself as the most intimidating form of military nationalism which continues to spur terror and violence till present day. The idea it adheres to is that Assam as a territory, people and culture has never been a part of India. Further, the colonial pattern of exploitation of the resources of

¹ Sharma, Sushil Kumar (2016) "Future Prospects of Peace Talk with United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) Genesis, Issues and Recommendations", *Vivekananda International Foundation*, p 4-23.

² Mahanta, Nani Gopal (2013) *Confronting the State ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty*, Delhi: Sage Publications, p.60.

³ Ibid p.60-61

Assam without paying dues to the development and progress of the region and its people nullifies the Indian State to rule over the region.

ULFA emerged right after and as a contrast to the Assam movement which had placed great optimism on the Indian State and constitutional amendment. ULFA categorically refused the authority of the State. Unlike the Assam Movement, which evoked its strong socio-cultural links with the rest of India and which often adopted largely Gandhian strategy; the insurgency led by the ULFA is blatantly secessionist in nature. In its official website ULFA states that, “To liberate Assam, (a land of 78,529 square K.M.), through Armed national liberation struggle from the clutches of the illegal occupation of India and to establish a sovereign Independent Assam” as its objective and goal. In the same website ULFA validates its choice for violence as a measure to counter the “colonial occupation” of the Indian state in Assam.⁴

ULFA wants to reveal that Assam was never a part of India at any point of time in history. The fact is independent Assam has been occupied by India, and deploying occupation forces they are oppressing our peoples and persecuting them. ULFA itself and all freedom fighters of Assam are neither planning nor conspiring to break up India! We are not conducting any armed operation inside India. Freedom fighters of Assam are only trying to overthrow Indian colonial occupation from Assam.

The ULFA since its inception has been responsible for innumerable deaths, bomb blasts, kidnapping and extortion. The key issues that it earmarked were control over the natural resources of the region, the rate and pattern of development, demographic changes and the question of preserving the traditional culture from being contaminated.

Objectives behind the formation of ULFA’s

If we look at aims and objectives behind the formation of ULFA it is found that though the liberation of Assam was the chief objective but there were also some other objectives which we can understand from following point:

- One of the most important objectives behind the formation of ULFA is to liberate Assam, through armed national liberation struggle and to establish a sovereign independent Assam.⁵
- Secondly, another significant objective of the organization was ULFA believes that they represent not only the Assamese nation but also the entire struggling peoples with independent thinking, irrespective of different race, tribe, caste, religion and nationality of Assam.
- Thirdly, according to ULFA, Assam was never a part of India at any point of time. The fact is independent Assam has been occupied by India, and deploying occupation

⁴ Das, Bitasta (2014) “ULFA’s Xhonor Axom and Negation of the State”, *Artha/Soc Sci*, Vol-13, Issue-4, p.38.

⁵ Mahanta, Nani Gopal, (2013) *Confronting the State ULFA’s Quest for Sovereignty*, Delhi: Sage Publications, p.61.

forces, they are opposing our peoples and persecuting them. ULFA itself and all freedom fighters of Assam are neither planning nor conspiring to break up India. According to them they are not conducting any armed operation inside India. Freedom fighters of Assam are only trying to over through Indian colonial occupation from Assam.

- Moreover, the organization also believes that in economic sphere, India has been engaged in large scale exploitation. For them, despite its rich resources, Assam remains one of the most backward states. Therefore, the question of real threat to the national identity of the people of Assam under the colonial occupation and exploitation of India has become the basic problem. Thus, as a whole the problem has become a question of life and death to the people of Assam.⁶

These were some of the significant objectives of ULFA because of which the organization was established.

ULFA's Violent Activities and Military Operations in Assam: The violent activities of ULFA were started basically during the period of 1980s and ULFA become more active from 1985 onwards after AGP came to power.⁷ It was found that On May 10, 1985, the ULFA led by Paresh Baruah and Hiraakjyoti Mahanta carried out a robbery in the United Commercial Bank of Silpukhuri in Guwahati. This was the first daring operation by the ULFA. Moreover another important violent activity of ULFA was Bank robbery of SBI in Namrup in which one police officer was killed namely Putul Bora. Apart from that ULFA continues to attempt ambushes and sporadic attacks on government security forces. In 2003, the ULFA was accused of killing labourers from Bihar in response to an alleged molestation of a Mizo girl in a train passing through Bihar. Moreover, ULFA has been involved in violent activities during the period when Chetia was already in prison in Bangladesh—the 2004 Independence Day blasts in Dhemaji and the 2008 serial bomb blasts in Guwahati are still fresh in people's mind. Therefore because of such kind of violent activities, government of India called in the Army in 1990 and President's rule was declared in Assam. And government has declared some military operation for bringing peace and bringing end of violent activities from Assam.

Operation Bajrang: The first military operation of Assam known as Operation Bajrang was launched on 28 November 1990, when the ULFA was banned and branded as a terrorist organization. Top leaders of the organization fled to safer countries. Police check posts became a familiar sight in Assam and people felt troubled by the Army's search operations and interrogations. Innocent youths were detained in Army camps which ultimately led to a growing feeling of hatred for the ULFA among the masses.

⁶ Ibid p.62

⁷ Talukdar, Mrinal. (2017) *Assam After Independence*, Guwahati: Nanda Talukdar Foundationn Pub Sarania, Guwahati & Kaziranga Books, Ambari., p.384.

When the Army launched Operation Bajrang, the word of the impending operation was leaked out to ULFA by their sympathizers in the State Government. Thus just a few low ranking cadres were apprehended but the top leadership escaped the dragnet. During the operations, in the Lakhpathar camp of ULFA and in the Saraipung jungles, mass graves were found, which told a tale of ULFA's blood and terror. The discovery shocked the people of Assam and demolished the Robin Hood image of the ULFA.⁸

Operation Rhino: Again, on September 14, 1991, Operation Rhino was launched in by the GOI. The operation proved a success in which most of the ULFA bases (91 in the State) were destroyed and nearly all of the top ULFA leadership were arrested. Over 300 ULFA cadres surrendered within 40 days of Op Rhino⁸. In November of the same year, Anup Chetia was apprehended in a guest house at Kolkata by the intelligence agencies. Within weeks of the start of Operation Rhino, the Army had apprehended 4300 suspects, of whom 1,700 were released after initial screenings. Apart from weapons, the Army had recovered seven million rupees. From the statements made by the apprehended leaders, it began to emerge that the leadership was changing its stance from Swadhin Asom to 'Swadhikar' (autonomy).⁹

Operation All Clear: Apart from that another important military operation was launched during early 1990s', due to pressure from the Bangladesh Government. At that time, ULFA shifted its camps from Bangladesh to the forests of Southern Bhutan. These camps were used to train cadres, store equipment, and launch attacks on targets in India. Talks between the Assamese insurgent groups and the Bhutan Government to prevent such illegal activities dragged on for six years. Finally, the Royal Government of Bhutan, in consultation with India, decided to take military action to destroy the insurgent camps located inside Bhutanese territory. The operation started on 15 December 2003 in which nearly 6,000 troops of the RBA took part. The Indian Army provided logistic support and sealed the Indo-Bhutan border to prevent militants from escaping. By 27 December 2003, 30 militant camps were destroyed and important leaders were either killed or captured. A large quantity of weapons and ammunition was also recovered. The operation was a big blow to all insurgent groups in Assam in general and ULFA in particular.

Peace Talks with ULFA: On 25 October 2005, the PCG and the Indian government held their first round of talks, thus raising hopes of ending the insurgency movement. The first round of talks was meant to prepare the ground for a formal bilateral declaration of ceasefire, and then to facilitate direct talks with the ULFA at later stage. The first round of talks addressed many issues, aiming to bring the ULFA to the negotiating table. The ULFA expressed its satisfaction with the PCG's move to raise the issue of 'sovereignty' during the

⁸ Sharma, Sushil Kumar, Future Prospects of Peace Talk with United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) Genesis, Issues and Recommendations, *Vivekananda International Foundation*, July, 2016, p.12

⁹ Ibid p.13.

talks. According to the ULFA, it is the first organization to take up the issue of sovereignty with the Union government.

The beginning of the second round of talks was marked by three complications: Violence unleashed by the ULFA prior to Republic Day in January 2006, the ULFA-AASU spat on the issue of sovereignty and the Union government's decision to invite five members from the PCG to the second round of talks. In this talk, three main issues that were discussed include: suspension of army operations, release of the ULFA's central committee members, and the information about missing cadres during Bhutan's operation.

In this way, with the arrest and deportation of top leaders by the Bangladesh government to India, the peace process of ULFA and GOI received a boost when the jailed ULFA leaders took the initiative of forming 'Citizen Forum' comprising intellectuals, writers, journalists and professionals from different fields in bringing GOI and ULFA to the negotiation table. Recently, on 24 April 2010, the forum passed a set of resolutions to expedite the peace process of GOI and ULFA.

Presently, the ULFA is a depleted force but Paresh Baruah, refusing to negotiate. Today, he has around 200 members with him and mostly he tried to kept his relevance through media statements, interviews and occasional attacks on soft targets even as the formidable ULFA struggle faded away from relevance. Moreover, the Paresh Baruah group also trying to bring faith from the people of Assam by giving some emotional statement relating to the people of Assam. For instance, very recent in the year 2016 at the time of Assamese Bihu season Paresh Baruah involved in a controversy with the singer Zubeen Garg. The issue was not to perform Hindi song in the month of Bohag and the entire Assamese singer must perform Bihu song in this month. But some of the singer including Zubeen Garg refused to do so and later it did not pose any result. Moreover, regarding the flood situation of Assam in present year Paresh Baruah has given warning to NEPCO for the flood situation in different parts of Assam and demanding for giving aid to the flood affected people. Thus, this ULFA independent faction is now trying to involve some crucial issue of Assam for getting back the support of the people of Assam.

Conclusion: It is very important to point out here that sovereignty in Assam can be a just dream only in Assam at present in reality it cannot be successful. Many reasons are there in this regard. For instance, in Assam there are so many communities are living and all these communities have now trying to revive their own identity. As a result, it becomes very difficult to get support by ULFA from all the communities of Assam and contrary to it ULFA now becomes the reference group for various communities of Assam. By taking as reference group now so many communities are demanding sovereignty in Assam. But during the period of 1980, all the communities of Assam supported ULFA from their heart and soul. Moreover, due to so many mistakes done by the leader of ULFA at different point of time it becomes very difficult for them to regenerate faith among the people of Assam. So, demand for sovereignty in Assam is not so easy for ULFA now. Therefore, it can be said that rather making Assam more violent all the leaders of ULFA should try to involve in

constructive discussion with government of India and should try to establish their demand in reality in peaceful way.

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