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Insurgency in Northeast India: A Case Study of a Former ULFA Member

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the individual narrative of a former United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) member, an insurgency group operating in Northeast India. A comprehensive interview outlines his path from a teenager drawn into the dream of combat for his native land, to six years of living and training in jungle camps in Assam, Nagaland, and Myanmar. The research reveals the everyday life within the camp, the protocol, the hardships, the training, and the emotional turmoil of those involved. While most research concentrates on the political and historical aspects of insurgency, this paper examines the human experience: what it's like to be in hiding, to be devoted to a cause, and to eke out an existence in hardship. The narrative assists us in better comprehending the reasons why certain youth take this route and how it affects their lives. By providing this firsthand account, the paper presents a fresh perspective on insurgency, beyond being a conflict, but as something very human.

Introduction

The jungles of Assam conceal stories seldom heard beyond their borders, stories of resilience, loss, and survival shaped by decades of conflict. Within the insurgent camps scattered across the remote frontiers

of Northeast India, young men and women have endured an existence caught between ideology and survival, loyalty and longing, purpose and disillusionment. This paper seeks to illuminate one such voice, a former ULFA member who entered the movement as a teenager and emerged after six years, irrevocably transformed.

Post-independence India has faced enduring challenges in integrating its culturally and ethnically diverse peripheries, particularly in the North Eastern Region (NER). Isolated by geography and demography, the region shares over 98% of its border with countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and Myanmar. A narrow 22-kilometre corridor, the Siliguri Corridor, connects it to the rest of India. This geographic seclusion, compounded by socio-political neglect, has contributed to persistent feelings of marginalisation, underdevelopment, and alienation among the local population.

NER is home to over 200 distinct tribal groups, each possessing its own linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identity. Efforts to incorporate these communities into the national "mainstream" have often been perceived as attempts at cultural homogenization, leading to resistance. Over time, this discontent gave rise to numerous insurgent movements, many of which sought either autonomy or complete secession from the Indian state.

Among these, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), founded in 1979, became one of the most prominent. Initially rooted in the rhetoric of protecting Assam's cultural and economic sovereignty, ULFA's activities evolved over time, increasingly characterised by factionalism, criminality, and internal disillusionment. While much has been written about ULFA's political agenda and armed struggle, this paper focuses instead on the human story, a personal testimony that sheds light on the daily rhythms, ideological dynamics, and psychological toll of insurgency.

The birth of ULFA and Insurgency in Assam

For many years, Assam experienced riots, protests, and unrest, particularly in 1951, 1960, and 1971, primarily due to linguistic problems, immigration, and population shifts. However, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) movement in 1973 was the primary catalyst for insurgency. Because AASU felt that the government would only pay attention to their demands if they protested loudly and a movement started in Sibsagar, Upper Assam, which spread throughout the state. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is a militant organization that was founded in 1978 by the more radical AASU members.

Conversely, the moderate members founded the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), which is now known as the AGP. Organizations such as Bangladesh's intelligence, Pakistan's ISI, and the NSCN provided support to ULFA. They created a "Robin Hood" image by doing social work while secretly building themselves into an armed insurgent group.

At the same time, AASU continued protests focusing on illegal immigration. Many political leaders opposed the Election Commission's and the Assam government's efforts to identify and deport illegal immigrants because they depended on them for votes. The Assam government resigned, President's Rule was enforced, and the Army was dispatched as a result of growing public outrage. The Army had to intervene once more in 1980 due to riots between Bengali migrants and local communities. The central government and AASU started to negotiate. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) of 1951 and the voter rolls of 1952 were used to identify illegal immigrants, and AASU demanded that those who arrived later be deported. But the central government only agreed to deport people who came after March 25, 1971 (the date when Bangladesh was formed). Disappointed, AASU persisted in their protests and blocked the Siliguri Corridor (a narrow land link between the northeast and the rest of India). The Assam Accord, which was signed in 1985, accepted March 25, 1971, as the deadline. It pledged additional funding and economic support for Assam. It promised more investment and economic help for Assam. According to the Accord, migrants who came before the cut-off date would be allowed to stay, while those who came after would be deported. In the following elections followed, the AGP formed the government in Assam.

However, dissatisfaction increased since the extremists were not satisfied with the deadline and no concrete measures were taken to improve Assam's economy or deport illegal migrants. ULFA exploited this situation and began engaging in violent activities, such as murders and terror attacks, starting in 1988. The Army was called in 1990 when President's Rule was proclaimed once more. Congress government took power, and the situation was somewhat under control. However, the Army was forced to return for additional operations against ULFA within a few months. These persisted until 1995, when the circumstances appeared stable enough for the Army to leave. Violence nevertheless returned because the fundamental problems— illegal migration and inadequate development— were not addressed. For counter-insurgency operations, the Army had to be recalled. Following pressure from the Army and police, ULFA relocated its base from Assam to Bangladesh. Pakistan, Bangladesh, and potentially China

have backed ULFA since its founding, allegedly inciting rebel groups in northeastern India to seek independence from India.

Surrendered ULFA

SULFA played an important role during one of the gloomiest times in Assamese insurgency history. The state and security forces used former ULFA militants who had surrendered in the early 1990s as spies in a violent counter-insurgency campaign. Once rebels themselves, these SULFA members turned into enforcers who, between 1998 and 2001, carried out a number of extrajudicial executions against the relatives and associates of active ULFA cadres. SULFA units carried out covert nighttime killings with the support of political leaders, particularly during the AGP administration, and with impunity while being protected by the Army and police. They frequently enticed victims with well-known Assamese greetings before killing them. As a group SULFA involved heavily in extortion, contract killings, and criminal networks—becoming a violent force with its own interests—rather than merely as a state instrument for quelling insurgency. SULFA's transition from militants who had surrendered to state-sponsored murderers reflects the ethical and legal collapse in Assam's war on insurgency through in-depth case studies and official reports.

Methodology

This paper is based on an in-depth, semi-structured interview with one former member of ULFA. The participant, who was in his teenage years when he joined the group, provided vivid accounts of his journey—from recruitment to eventual surrender and return to civilian life. His name is kept confidential for ethical purposes, and pseudonyms have been adopted where they are used. The story was examined using a thematic framework around ideological motivation, camp existence, hierarchical organisation, and emotional processes.

Ideological Awakening and Recruitment

The participant's political consciousness was first stirred during his high school years. He recounted attending meetings led by Aurobindo Rajkhowa, the then President of the Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), who would later become a key leader of ULFA. These gatherings, centred on themes of ethnic identity, self-determination, and justice, deeply resonated with the young student.

"I was still in my teenage years in high school when I first came across ULFA's ideology... I believed I could do something meaningful for my motherland."

Encouraged by Rajkhowa, he agreed to spend what was initially intended to be three months in a ULFA camp. However, the short-term commitment extended into a six-year odyssey across Assam, Nagaland, and Myanmar.

Journey Through the Jungles: From Assam to Myanmar

The journey from Assam to Myanmar was arduous. After an initial six-month stay in Nagaland, a group of approximately 70 recruits undertook a perilous trek to the Kachin region of Myanmar, traversing rugged terrain and dense forests.

"It was a long, difficult journey through rough terrain… no proper food or sleep. Just the fear of the unknown, and yet, a strange kind of determination."

Upon arrival in Nagaland, the recruits underwent an induction program to familiarise themselves with local languages and adapt to the conditions. They were eventually relocated to formal camps in Myanmar, where ideological indoctrination gave way to military training.

Life in the Camps: Structure, Training, and Survival

The camps operated under a strict code of discipline guided by ULFA's internal constitution. Infractions, especially those related to fraternisation or disobedience, were met with severe punishment, including execution.

"There was zero tolerance for breaking the rules... even death, if it came to that."

Recruits received extensive training in guerrilla warfare, survival skills, and border operations. Over time, the participant rose to the position of **Battalion Sergeant Major**, reflecting both experience and leadership within the camp hierarchy.

Daily routines were regimented:

- **Wake-up:** 4:00 AM
- **Training & Duties:** Combat drills, survival tactics, border surveillance
- **Lights Out:** 9:00 PM

Food was scarce and utilitarian. Recruits consumed whatever was available, including wild game. Local villagers, often under pressure from the NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland), provided occasional support. Makeshift elevated beds were constructed to avoid exposure to toxic ground gases, which were said to emit a faint nocturnal glow.

Diseases were rampant. Medical aid was rare and clandestine. The participant recounted a near-fatal illness, calling his recovery "a miracle."

Memory, Meaning, and Reflection

Despite the harshness of camp life, the participant expressed little regret about his decision to join ULFA, though he lamented the loss of his education.

"I had thought I'd be back in a few months… but life took a different turn."

Unique anecdotes also surfaced, offering glimpses into camp culture. Urgent letters were marked with red chillies, and recreational activities, including sports competitions with Burmese university students, offered brief respites from the grim realities of jungle warfare. In one such competition, winners received animal skulls as trophies, an emblem of the surreal world they inhabited.

Conclusion

This narrative underscores the complex interplay between ideology, survival, and personal agency in Assam's insurgent landscape. The participant's story is emblematic of a generation caught between competing nationalisms, torn by the promise of revolution and the pull of home. While insurgent movements in Northeast India have often been reduced to political footnotes or security challenges, this account serves as a reminder that beneath every armed struggle lies a deeply human story.

Future scholarship must give greater voice to these lived experiences, not to glorify or condemn but to understand the nuanced realities that inform insurgency, identity, and resistance in India's Northeast.

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Editor's Note: All opinions/thoughts articulated in the paper are solely the author's.