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The politics of freedom and the women of United Liberation Front of Assam

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Living and Partly Living: The politics of freedom and the women of United Liberation Front of Assam*

Rakhee Kalita Moral**

"For us there is no action...but only to wait and witness
Living and partly living..."

T. S. Eliot's 1939 dramatic narrative of a tale of human ambition, power and sedition in *Murder in the Cathedral* centred on a beleaguered English monarchy and a morally corrupt Church yoked to the medieval state is witnessed ironically by a band of poor, rustic and seemingly ineffectual women more famously called the Women of Canterbury.[1] Part of the epigraph of this paper, 'Living and partly living', borrowed from that lyrical refrain about those women seeks to bring attention to shared experiences and strangely common destinies elsewhere. My invocation of their seminal, if somewhat sad presence in a nation's moment of apocalypse in another modern-day context of confrontation and violence is not, however, intended to draw any other parallel but that of vulnerability in the time of conflict.

The Conflict

The 'ethnonational' mission of the *United Liberation Front of Assam* (*Asom Sanjukta Mukti Bahini),* or ULFA, in its war against

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[1] In T. S. Eliot's play on the political life of the twelfth-century English saint, St. Thomas, the women of Canterbury who encounter spiritual combat and perform the role of the Chorus in this account of dissidence in the state, while being privy to the strange rise and fall of Thomas' fate, are in the end left to accept their sad lot.

the Indian state is an armed struggle by self-styled revolutionaries and an organisation predominantly of a section of the youth of Assam to wrest what they believe is freedom from colonial dominion and, thus, fulfilment of regional aspirations.[2] A significant feature of this thirty-year old guerrilla style insurgency is the large support bases it elicited from vast sections of the Assamese populace which included a substantial number of young women who joined its fold after the first decade of its existence. ULFA's women cadres however do not have a separate wing, unlike most other major insurgencies in South Asia, and are regarded as common members subject to standard regulations of the outfit. These women drawn mostly from rural and semi-rural backgrounds trace a peculiar social history of Assam's long tryst with insurgency. That the recruits of ULFA were from various parts of the state but concentrated mainly in Upper Assam where the ideologues of the outfit are based is no coincidence. The state's capital in Dispur, closer to the mainland and far from the districts spread over stretches that span the length of the Brahmaputra, running from Dhubri in the far west to its upper reaches in the easternmost point near Arunachal Pradesh bordering China, is psychologically more attuned to the realpolitik of Delhi than the rest of Assam which shares with the Northeast, collectively, a sense of disconnect from the country.[3]

The strategic site of this northeastern part of the country, located on the cusp where South Asia blends into Southeast Asia, evokes its own geopolitics inseparable from the region's distance and remoteness from the Indian mindscape. As recent historians have argued, to the rest of the country and beyond, Assam and her people were reduced 'in official colonial lexicon to a wild frontier society without history', outside the lineage of Indic history and Aryan culture.[4] In fact colonial ethnographers at the turn of the century labelled the ruling class Ahoms,

[2] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself. Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. For a linear history of the outfit and sequence of events related to the rebel group, see, Mrinal Talukdar and Hemanta Kalita, *ULFA*. Bhabani Press, Guwahati: 2012 .

[3] Samir Kumar Das, "India's Look East Policy: Imagining a New Geography of India's Northeast", *India Quarterly*, 66/4 (2010), pp. 343–58.

[4] Yasmin Saikia, Assam, "India and Southeast Asia: The Tai-Ahom Connection", *Seminar,* Vol. 550 (June 2005), pp. 59–65.

descended from the Shan community of Burma, with many of its migrant populations in neighbouring Thailand, as 'degenerate, apathetic and backward Assamese'.[5] Voices from the academe within the region have also articulated the culture of the northeast as having, at least in parts, originated from somewhere beyond the country's borderlands.[6] A common, if sweeping notion, thus, attached to the identity of the 'Northeasterner' is the fact of her remoteness from the rest of the countrymen, her phenotypic difference, even her cultural affiliates often making her an outsider in her own land. To much of India the northeast evokes a separateness from the nation. This in turn gives the region the perceived attribute of a 'militant' frontier that over time has come to stick.

When this band of young and disgruntled Assamese rebels, therefore, sought to bring about a 'revolution' demanding the end of exploitation, asserting their autonomous history independent from the nation-building project, it was symbolically flagged off at Sivasagar in Upper Assam, the old capital of the royal Ahom dynasty which ruled for six hundred years before Assam was annexed by British imperialists in 1826.[7] The Ahoms trace their genealogy to their Southeast Asian antecedents and are considered notional and emotional kinsmen long separated by international boundaries arbitrarily drawn by colonial rulers in the old dispensation. While history and its memory may have a small, if significant, role in evoking powerful responses from posterity, it needs to be noted that the region's more recent reality—social, economic and geopolitical — may have much to do with the rebellion in question.

The armed rebellion, itself, perhaps a mnemonic carry over from the angst of an older colonial underdeveloped region towards a more pronounced and tangible political reaction to the lack of reconstruction in post-national times, wears as its symbolic code the twin badges of 'injustice and exploitation'.This has been well accommodated in the

[5] Ibid.
[6] Mrinal Miri, "Community, Culture, Nation", *Seminar,* Vol. 550 (June 2005).
[7] Sanjib Baruah, *Postfrontier Blues*. Policy Studies 33. East-West Center. Washington. 2007, p. 13.

Assamese response to its present extremist phase.[8] The contemporary struggle of the rebels in the region was, to a large extent, recognised by most people as being intertwined with the notion of an Assamese regional patriotism and a sense of aggrieved freedom which sought to renegotiate the state's social and political contract with India. The grandiose hardline represented best by the erstwhile Commander-in-Chief and leader of the anti-talks faction of ULFA, Paresh Baruah's stand, "We have never talked about negotiations, because our position on Asom's sovereignty is non-negotiable", is hardly surprising. This is now considered mere rhetoric in the outfit's dramatic ideological rise and decline.[9]

The year 1979 marks a turning point when the 'Assam movement' launched by a student organisation against huge illegal immigrations across the borders into the state found itself sharing public attention with the fledgling insurgent group, United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) the same year. While the student movement focussed on the foreigners' issue this breakaway radical segment decided to highlight a larger identity crisis and what it called 'gross negligence' of Assam by the Center. ULFA, as Sanjib Baruah has observed, 'views independent India's relationship with Assam as a colonial one'.[10] If Assam in its post-colonial history had witnessed anything close to a nationalist upsurge, it was the *Bhaxa Andolan* or the Language movement of the 1960s that stirred regional passions. The student-led agitation demanding a ban on foreign influx and the centre's active support in detecting and deporting these immigrants echoed the regional sentiments of the language movement. The theatre of dissent had begun and the stage was soon set for a massive wave of resentment against the way New Delhi handled the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh.

What grew out of these contexts was a general perception that the past had been a different country and in the Assamese imagination,

[8] Hiren Gohain, "Extremist Challenge and the Indian State: Case of Assam", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31/31 (3 August,1996), pp. 2066–2068.
[9] Email interview of Paresh Baruah to *The Indian Express* (25 September, 2006).
[10] "The Rise and Decline of a Separatist Insurgency. Contentious Politics in Assam, India", in Rajat Ganguly (ed.), *Autonomy and Ethnic Conflict in South and Southeast Asia* (ed.), (New York and Delhi: Routledge, 2012) pp. 27–45.

that past stood for a sovereign and independent entity of Assam which had to be retrieved. It powerfully launched, thus, the "idea" of ULFA that Baruah reckons has prevailed more concretely than the outfit's actual operational achievements through its long tryst with the Indian state.[11] This is also perhaps attended by the more complex belief that a single national ethnos in modern history is only a convenient myth and that as Arjun Appadurai[12] has noted elsewhere, 'the idea of a sovereign and stable territory' like the notion of a stable national identity and well-being threatens to come unglued in contemporary times. For India's Northeast, and particularly Assam, the secessionist tendencies of ULFA, too, probably issued out of mistrust in such an idea.

The Women

In the Assam agitation led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) from 1979 to 1985, girls and women swelled the large protests, processions and satyagrahas organised in various phases of the movement across the state. Female picketers at the oil installation in Narengi, Guwahati, for instance, as reported by local press, outnumbered the men in the move for an oil blockade and their overwhelming presence made obvious that they were at the forefront of the agitation.[13] Civil society participation at the height of the movement, particularly after Assam was once again declared a 'Disturbed Area' in 1980 at the behest of the Governor left the administration unprepared for local reactions.[14] In an unprecedented display of popular support, women lent a rare legitimacy to the movement as they spilled out to the streets in huge processions to protest the government's apathy and neglect toward what was deemed as the Assamese national issue. It was at this time that the various Mahila Samitis of the state reorganised to take up the programmes of

[11] "Separatist Militants and Contentious Politics in Assam, India. The Limits of Counterinsurgency", *Asian Survey*, Vol XLIX, #6 (November–December 2009) pp. 951–974.
[12] *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 6.
[13] *The Assam Tribune*, Guwahati. 7 April 1980.
[14] Sanjaya, *A Crisis of Identity. Assam* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1980) pp. 39–40.

AASU as their mission for the moment and work for the cause of Assamese nationalism.[15] *Jai Ai Asom* or Hail Mother Assam, the clarion cry of the movement, went down well with the older women who identified emotionally with the young students who took up cudgels on behalf of the Assamese society appropriately symbolised by the woman/nation figure which subsumed the idea of the patriotic mother. For, as M. S. Prabhakara has observed, "all the agitations in the northeast region project the woman as the most precious custodian of the virtues" of the community for which the men fight.[16] The point seems to be also well taken in the case of the *Meira Paibis* of Manipur or the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) of Nagaland, both women's collectivities, that have despite heavy odds, striven to boldly lead communities in conflict out of chaos and into social transformation.[17] If this has any bearings on some of the predominantly matrilineal societies of the hills of Meghalaya and the cultural ethos of the proximal regions it is also important to note that even many of these matri-focal societies are not gender equitable, and nor are its women sufficiently empowered despite their apparent freedom, rights of inheritance, emancipatory lives or non practice of dowry.[18] Yet in an accepted gender perspective, women of the region are invested with a notional liberty and elevated status and thereby, agency, more frequently debated in the present circumstances of conflict;[19] though their cultural worldview remains locked in various grids of patriarchy. It is against this ambivalent social

[15] Sheila Borthakur and Sabita Goswami, "The Assam Movement", in Ilina Sen (ed.), *A Space Within the Struggle* (New Delhi: Kali For Women, 1990).

[16] M.S. Prabhakara, *Looking Back into the Future: Identity and Insurgency in Northeast India* (New Delhi and Oxford: Routledge, 2012), p. 150.

[17] Rita Manchanda, "Where are the Women in South Asian Conflicts?" in Rita Manchanda (ed.), *Women, War and Peace in South Asia. Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (New Delhi and London: Sage Publications, 2001), pp. 9–41.

[18] Patricia Mukhim, "Land Ownership among the Khasis of Meghalaya: A Gender Perspective" (eds.) in Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora, *Land, People and Politics* (Northeastern Social Research Center and IWGIA, 2009), pp. 38–52.

[19] See for example, Chris Coulter, "Female Fighters in the Sierra Leone War: Challenging the Assumptions", *Feminist Review,* #88 , 2008 (War), pp. 54–73. In this interesting essay on women's agency in conflict, the author complicates the gendered stereotypes that women's participation in war is entrenched in and recovers a new and nuanced understanding of the role of female fighters that helps collapse the neat dichotomies of victim/perpetrator.

reality that the role of women in non-traditional female spheres such as violence, and in particular, the recent insurgency acquires critical historical importance.

The gradual entry of females into ULFA, often rightly seen as the more radical and militant form of Assam's grouse against Delhi and the Indian state, thus, poses an interesting slant to this whole public narrative of discontent. Though the Assamese are neither matrilineal, nor matriarchal, as communities in some other northeastern states are, and belong in a social ethos that is traditionally located in a patriarchy, women here have moved more easily between the 'spheres' with greater mobility as the voluntary presence of a substantial number of insurgent women in ULFA indicates. Yet, the idea of women's empowerment and equality remains fraught and the personal interviews and conversations with many of the demobilised women cadres who had taken to armed combat suggest an inherent paradox in notions about emancipation and rights. Were they simply care givers, companions and comfort women as is the general impression about the female cadres of ULFA? Or do we look at them as actual rebels with real autonomy or aspirations for it? More importantly, are they women who truly represent the Assamese ethnos? And finally, are they key witnesses and authentic reporters of the strife and seasons of mistrust that ensued within the insurgent organisation?

To begin with, women joined the fray in 1989 for the first time when Moni Hazarika (aka Pratibha Gogoi), Dalimi Dutta (Anju Saikia), Meghali Kharghoria (Mamoni Dihingia), among others, and the better known Pronoti Deka, who later rose to become ULFA's first Cultural Secretary, graduated from their village or council duties in the '*xakhas*' and '*mandals*' and left their respective homes to formally enlist as cadres.[20] As a senior surrendered member of the outfit remarks, the need to induct women was 'tactical'. They were efficient emissaries, often connecting village to village and communities to camps and spread the outfit's mission more successfully than the men who were pushed

[20] ULFA's organisational structures are broadly listed in the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP). *www.satp.org* accessed 1 Oct. 2010.

further into the jungles and were constantly under surveillance.[21] This was particularly apparent in the years 1990 and 1991, when counter insurgency moves Bajrang and Rhino led by the Indian Army were in full operation in Assam.

It is not easy to comprehend the extent to which this motley group of women cadres, mostly in their early twenties, easily represented the collective will of the people back home as they joined their comrades in the camps. It would also be nearly incomprehensible to those without a close-up of the historical moments of the 1980s and 1990s of Assam, how nearly every village or little mofussil town, particularly in Upper Assam identified with the 'boys' of the now banned outfit who left their homes or colleges in search of a 'freedom' they believed such a revolution might bring, however romantic, in retrospect, the notion may have been.[22] The Assamese rhetoric of the late 1980s and early nineties revealed that ULFA was a household name, an indulgence that is today somewhat difficult to explain. Or why, for instance, some of those echoes are still faintly available in the ordinary man-on-the-street's ambivalence towards any suggestion of the outfit's extermination despite the obvious plummeting of its credibility and trust in Assamese civil society.[23]

The women of ULFA incidentally constituted a small percentage of the group, and senior cadres of the outfit reveal that they would not have exceeded 12–15% of the total membership at any given point in the organisation's existence.[24] The 1990s saw the entry of women in a resurgent wave: young, collegiate, high school dropouts, student

[21] Sunil Nath, better known by his nom de guerre Siddhartha Phukan, former publicity chief of the ULFA and one of the first of the famous 1991 surrenderees, is today a dispassionate critic and observer of the outfit. His candid view of the women lends credence to the perception that their presence in the organization brought about structural changes in the operational strategies.

[22] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 148.

[23] Hiren Gohain, "Chronicles of Violence and Terror. The Rise and Decline of United Liberation Front of Asom", *Economic and Political Weekly*. #42:12 (24 March, 2007), p. 1012.

[24] Interview with Pradip Gogoi, Vice Chairman of ULFA, conducted at the Guwahati Central Jail, 31 October 2007.

leaders; these represented the categories of mostly rural, semi-urban females who enlisted and took to the camps in Myanmar (Burma) and later in neighbouring Bhutan. In a moment of emotional expansiveness at the Guwahati jail, the septuagenarian Bhimkanta Buragohain, ideologue and ULFA'S endearing 'mama' told the author of how he welcomed the 'Kanaklatas' to the fold when the scattered cadres sought refuge in the camps of Bhutan in the late 1990s.[25] The analogy perhaps deserves its own qualification insofar as the contrary natures of a nonviolent freedom movement and that of armed insurgent struggle go, but the statement nevertheless revealed the positive reaction to change with the arrival of the young women in the camps. What had been an all male bastion now witnessed the presence of feminine exigencies, shrieks of surprise, the cries of pain and the tinkling laughter of leisure. Where there had been brute strength, grit and unrelenting determination from day to night, there was now the possibility of an hour of solace and a romantic interlude in the midst of jungle warfare and backbreaking training.

Clearly the camp dynamic had been transformed. And all by a few years later, when it was faced with the dramatic raid by the Royal Bhutanese Army in 2003, the scene had just as suddenly shifted to a melee of fleeing cadres, men on the run, females in various states of unpreparedness, women accosted with infants, couples separated, the loud wailing of babies and frightened children.[26] This counterinsurgency operation in the Indo-Bhutan borderlands, designated 'All Clear', also heralded the beginning of a saga of lost lives, missing men, widowed wives and orphaned infants.

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[25] Bhimkanta Buragohain one of the 'founding fathers' of the organization passed away in 2011. His reference is to the legendary Assamese woman martyr of the national freedom struggle, Kanaklata Baruah, whose attempt with other revolutionaries at Gohpur, near Tezpur in September 1942 to hoist the Indian tricolor resulted in her death by police firing while still holding the flag to the cries of *Vande Mataram*. This is one of those historical moments of India's freedom movement that has sadly remained unacknowledged in its many annals and authorized textbooks of history.

[26] See for instance, this report on ULFA's Bhutan camps in the wake of Operation All Clear, a joint move of the Royal Bhutanese Army complicit with the Indian security forces, by Nayanjyoti Bhuyan, *Asomiya Pratidin (Assamese Daily)*, 25 December 2003.

As a random survey of the backgrounds of ULFA's women reveals, they came from families that were typically part of the loyalists of the insurgents, across communities in small towns and villages, which often hosted the boys when they returned from the camps and their hideouts to coordinate with civilians and supporters back in the home ground. Many of them were girls whose familial homes had actually been safe houses, and who had often heard stories of the camps and the jungles from cadres stopping enroute when they came on their nocturnal missions. This was true for the years between 1990 and 1995 when many villages in ULFA territory (predominantly in Nalbari, in Lower Assam and Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur and Tinsukia in Upper Assam) had been nearly flushed clean of cadres or 'suspects' or even supporters and often of male family members of cadres.[27] The Disturbed Areas provision had facilitated indiscriminate arrests and the AFSPA (1956), a draconian act was regarded as licence to wipe out anyone who seemed even a remote threat to national unity and authority. As Udayon Misra comments, it was therefore perhaps not strange that ULFA was also the only militant organisation in Assam that drew into its fold "young people from virtually all Assamese communities and ethnic groups".[28] The boys in the jungles, under the circumstances, were obviously seen in the image of bravehearts and heroes and going away to be where they were was not a very difficult decision for a civil society complicit with the mood of rebellion gripping the state. Besides, women were more mobile and could easily give the slip to security personnel and cross and negotiate sensitive areas more effectively than the young men could.

One of the earliest of the female recruits, Dalimi Dutta, alias Anju Saikia, 48, got involved in the outfit's Zila Samiti at Sivasagar in 1986–87 while she was an undergraduate student. Dalimi later became the cultural secretary of that unit in 1989 when she was formally inducted into ULFA. She was arrested under the Terrorists and Disruptive

[27] Uddipan Dutta in *Creating Robin Hoods: The Insurgency of ULFA in Its Early Period, Its Parallel Administration and the Role of Assamese Vernacular Press(1985–1990)* (New Delhi: Wiscomp, 2009), p. 74, alludes to the phenomenon of women and girls joining the ULFA voluntarily in the 1990s.
[28] Udayon Misra, "No Military Solution for Assam", *The Hindu.* 8 October 2004.

Activities Act (TADA) during the 1990 Bajrang counter insurgency operations and was let off a year later. Her work in the *xakha* had made her a natural leader and she recounts how in 1994 having plunged back into the organisation, she left the country for Kachin in Myanmar to undergo arms training in one of the first military camps for women.[29] Undeterred by the hardships of camp life, Dalimi had steeled herself for a revolutionary's 'sacrifice' and married a fellow cadre Amarjyoti Bora, in September 1999, who was killed in an encounter a year later leaving her pregnant, widowed and alone. Two decades later she is sceptical of later day women recruits randomly inducted, who she sees as individual-centric, lacking the moral integrity, education and 'tradition' that first generation women cadres inculcated and exemplified.[30] Dalimi clearly represents on the map of ULFA membership the key Upper Assam stronghold of Sivasagar, seen both as the home of the outfit's think tank and its cultural nerve centre. In conversations with many other female members from other parts it was not difficult to identify her intensely political involvement with the outfit's goals and diktats and of others like her who came from that region.

A common activity that most women recruits had engaged in before their induction was to attend secret political meetings organised by local units of ULFA, the *xakhas*, that spread to the smallest block in the districts, which may have radicalised young men and women and prepared them for their initiation into the outfit. Pronoti Deka, former Cultural Secretary of the outfit's Central Secretariat (the only female executive in ULFA's political wing), arrested in 2003 at Phulbari in Meghalaya near the Bangladesh border, admits that her introduction to Vice Chairman, Pradip Gogoi, at a Nalbari unit meeting in 1987

[29] Dalimi Dutta, disbanded and demobilised former combatant in an interview with the author at Guwahati, November 2007.

[30] See also, "Women in the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal", in Manchanda (ed.), *Women, War and Peace in South Asia*, pp. 214–251. It was common, among the Maoists too to prepare young girls politicized in high school to be drawn later into armed struggle. The most literate cadres, came from the Gorkha district, acknowledged a hub of radical left politics in Nepal, and whose profile was vastly different from those in Rolpa and Rukum districts, the other two locations from where a substantial number of women joined the People's War.

convinced her of the ideological mission and compelled her to join the outfit two years later.[31] As Pronoti reiterates, her resolve to be part of ULFA was 'never emotional' but a mature step she mulled for a long time before climbing over the fence onto the other side. Clearly, a cultural front of the organisation had been replicated in Assam's villages and small towns which also attracted several educated young women who later seemed to naturally gravitate towards formal cadreship. Most, of course, ran away and disappeared into the jungles in what they perhaps saw as an act of sacrifice toward their people and '*jati*', a community of fellow Assamese, and emulated the organisational behaviour of guerrilla revolutionaries.[32] Other times, the girls had to conspire and plot through letters and secret messages with the men in jungles to whisk them away at what seemed an opportune moment.[33] Sometimes the decision to enlist was accompanied by tacit support of family, or at least by siblings who shared the enthusiasm for change and the spirit of revolution that swept rural and semi-urban Assam. The benign civic nationalism of an earlier age had somewhere along the way been replaced by a more exclusive and often aggressive ethno-nationalism that was attended by a political voluntarism typical to the cadres.[34]

My argument in this paper stems from the recent state of affairs with respect to former combatants and demobilised women cadres of the organisation whose lives inside the camp in the wilderness and later outside in deeper and murkier spaces narrate stories of entrapment, of a calling misplaced or even, naive, that failed to find its true goals

[31] In a conversation with the author at the Guwahati Central Jail (31 0ctober 2007), Deka stated in an impassioned manner how 'Sir' explained to them the meaning of 'freedom' and the politics of armed struggle. In 1987, she attended the meeting as a volunteer that later prompted her to give up her job of Lecturer of Assamese at Nalbari College to join ULFA.

[32] Interview of Pronoti Deka by author at Guwahati Central Jail, 5 December 2007.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History*. Polity Press: (2000), p. 16. See also, Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging. Journeys into the New Nationalisms,* Chatto and Windus: 1993, where, the author argues for the claims of ethnicity that prevail over a larger national consciousness at certain moments in a nation's history.

in the manner the story unfolded over three decades of strife and struggle. Caught in the borderlands between home and hideout these women have lived and only partly lived despite their willed involvement in what they believed was the making of a people's destiny. The idea of 'freedom' had seemed to these simple rustic folk a home grown entity to which they were entitled and was a derivative of the larger nationalism that the older generation had witnessed. If their parents and grandparents had talked of the freedom struggle, in the present dispensation the 'freedom' call had taken on a new and sharper ring in the post-colony, on the hazy peripheries of the nation-state. All of the major insurgencies in post-independent India had arguably risen out of badly managed borderlands and frontiers, whether in the Kashmir valley or in the troubled and balkanised northeast, namely in the hills of Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur or Assam on the fringes of a southeast Asian neighbourhood. And if the freedom of the postcolonial promise had left a somewhat bitter taste it resulted in a disconnect between the mainland and these borderland people and an overwhelming sense of fear and inadequacy about the future.[35]

The Tenth Foundation Day Pamphlet of ULFA announced that its goal was to 'restore Assam's lost independence' and vouched to create an 'atmosphere for developing integrity among the indigenous races and tribes' of the state, clearly indicating what the organisation perceived as its inclusive mission of regional solidarity.[36] What has been particularly interesting in this rebellion is that its press releases addressed the *Asombaxis* (Assam's inhabitants) and not only the *Asomiyas* (the Assamese) and thus scored a trump card over the more chauvinistic foreigners' movement when it came to the notions of identity and ethnic assertions across peoples and communities living in Assam. Further, the mix of ethnic groups and various indigenous communities

[35] Militarisation has become a way of life in the region with "the deficits of democracy, development and peace best explained by Northeast India's history as a frontier". See for instance, *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India* (ed.), Tilottoma Misra. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), Introduction.

[36] *Xonjukto Mukti Bahini Axom (ULFA)* Special Publicity Pamphlet, 7 April 1989. "Doi Kao Rong" ULFA.

in the ranks of ULFA's own cadres is evidence of the non-partisan and non-discriminatory attitude it at least began with which they drew a huge and crucial support base from cross sections of people. The notion that in a progressive age, the capital and cunning of the more prosperous mainland migrant confronts the Assamese who is ill-equipped to handle it, is of course, not entirely without a psycho-social basis. As remarked by academic and social critic Hiren Gohain, this "lack of economic power combined with the survival of feudal habits of thought has made the Assamese middle class dangerously prone to reactionary thinking".[37] In fact the temptation, he adds, to fall back upon an 'imaginary past', that of a golden age perhaps prevalent in the regal and prosperous kingdom of the Ahoms, is indeed very strong. Yet, elsewhere Gohain also admits that post independence, the national leadership failed to appreciate the difficulties of a neglected, backward and weak national group, and in this backdrop the fears of the Assamese are understandable.[38]

To come back then to the focus of this discussion, dreams of the revival of such a past, innocent if utopian, led many young people to respond animatedly to what appeared to be the call of the community, or the *raiz*, a word that sums up as it were, the little nation seeking its liberation and delivery from the exploits of the big brotherly Indian state. 'Raiz' denotes not just community but carries an overlap of the ethnonational or sub-national yearning for a polity, though it must be borne in mind that in the English rendering this important distinction is lost. It is vital to recover this inflection in order to appreciate the import of what 'freedom' these women may have imagined on the path to armed struggle. Women who happily followed the call of destiny and swayed along to what was ostensibly the tune of the freedom song often sought to invoke the 'remembered' collective memory of the imagined community of the past. But then, as the truism goes, the past is another country. To corroborate what I flag here, I shall bring into the discussion some testimonies that I have from a section of the former

[37] "Origins of the Assamese Middle Class", *Social Scientist,* 2/1 (1973), p. 23.
[38] "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist", *Economic and Political Weekly,* 16/21 (1981), p. 924.

combatants I interviewed in the course of my research on their role in the insurgency in Assam.[39] It is part of the aim of this study to pull them out of the shadows they have lingered in and render them visible in ULFA's history.

ULFA's camps in Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh grew in number in the years following the first serious wave of counterinsurgency measures in the state. Many hardline cadres receded into the jungles amidst a famously staged official 'surrender' of some key rebels in 1991, in the wake of Operation Bajrang followed by Rhino between 1990 and 1995, pulled off by the then state's enthusiastic Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia, in which it is claimed nearly 4,000 cadres withdrew from the band.[40] Young women simultaneously got inducted as stories of boys being apprehended and tortured, local heroes going missing, or cadres on the run killed in army encounters made up the headlines. The vernacular press in Assam fuelled the popular imagination with a Robin Hood image of ULFA that easily fitted into the Assamese ethnos, something that is difficult to explain to those who did not witness the militarisation of Assam.[41] Girls who ran away and disappeared overnight, sometimes tacitly backed by the family and other times covertly, made their way into the camps in Myanmar, and later along the Indo Bhutan borders. In those years there was a reported strength of around 2,000 cadres in southern Bhutan alone, where ULFA's General HQ, its Council HQ, a Security cum Training Camp and an 'Enigma Base' were located.[42] In 1991 when the membership of ULFA in the Bhutan and Myanmarese camps alone was substantially huge, the women were barely a 10–12% of the total strength.[43] Yet, there

[39] The women who range from the early twenties to the mid-forties, twenty-four of them in all, who I interviewed over the past few years have different experiences and stories to narrate. Their silence in the insurgency discourse so far obviously begs a serious probe into the woman's question of ULFA.

[40] Ajay Sahni and Bibhu Prasad Routray, SULFA: "Terror by Another Name", *Faultlines. A Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution.* Vol. 9, 2001.

[41] See for instance, Uddipan Dutta's account of the early years of ULFA vis-à-vis the vernacular press in which he emphasizes this central aspect of the outfit's popular image in *Creating Robin Hoods* (2008).

[42] Anil Bhat, *Assam. Terrorism and the Demographic Challenge* (New Delhi: Center for Land Warfare Studies, 2009), p. 23.

[43] ULFA Vice-Chairman, Pradip Gogoi in interview to author in December 2007.

was quite evidently a significant impact on the working of the organisation once women entered the fold.

Camps and Freedom

A surrendered cadre, around 28 years old, who spoke on conditions of anonymity, admitted, that her years of training in ULFA's Enigma Base when she was barely 17 and out of high school in 2000, were some of the most difficult but challenging years of her life. She is now married and looks back with mixed feelings on the ULFA experience.[44] The arduous training in her long stint in the most rigorous camp of ULFA is recorded by her in a diary she hopes people will get to read one day. Most people however may never know who this combat heroine was and where she is today. The troubling contradictions she experienced inside the camp attest to the many difficulties of actually practising what the outfit long upheld as its main ideals, freedom and unity. In her neatly hand-written pages of the diary that she filled out from the day she arrived at her camp near Nalbari, on the Indo-Bhutan border, to about the time of the crackdown, the narratives may unfold details that have never found their way into the conflict discourse. In a few entries she talks of her overwhelming need to break free when she figured that male members were privy to certain information that was not disclosed to the women.[45]

Along with a few other young women like Chayanika Saikia who is from the Nagaon district, she learnt the ropes of combat and constraint with dozens of young men who trained alongside. Weilding an AK56 and an UMG alternately in the camp, she honestly reminisces of the strange and unexplained power of carrying arms with men. What egged her on? I asked. Her quiet and unwavering reply was 'freedom'. Born into a 'tribal' family, not very far from the suburban fringes of Guwahati, and carrying a sense of identity of representing a smaller group in a polyglot and multi-ethnic Assam, she saw entry into ULFA

[44] Enigma Base along the Indo-Bhutanese border flanking Nalbari district in western Assam was ULFA's refuge for dreaded militants trained in combat and frontline warfare from the mid-1990s to 2003 when the RBA busted the camps and flushed out the outfits' cadres.

[45] Unpublished diary of former woman combatant, name withheld.

as an escape from that life. She unhesitatingly talks of her 'complexes' when she met non 'tribal' Assamese girls at school and of her decision to escape to neighbouring Goalpara district from where she began her journey to ULFA. The fear of small numbers or that of ethnic origins, in her case had rightly blurred the distinctions between wars of the nation and wars in the nation. An understanding of the politics of community and ethnicity is another core dimension of rebellion in the state that goes to constitute the larger politics of its violence. The ethno-national pull originating in the sense of being alienated within the greater Assamese community and which ULFA's earliest leaders saw as a huge barrier to Assamese solidarity was sought to be accommodated and ameliorated within the outfit's non-partisan, non-hierarchical codes, at least as far as induction and cadre profile mattered.[46] Her sense of being a Rabha girl, one of the many indigenous Mongoloid communities inhabiting western Assam is repeatedly articulated in her need to belong to the nation. In one entry, she tells herself that she has sworn by the outfit's flag and with the bite of the bullet to 'protect her nation' and shall lay down her life for it.[47] Clearly, a resolve, which in later years is overshadowed by the regret that problems in leadership have made cheap the sacrifices of many like her, diluting the perceived ideals of the organisation. Her most terrible memory is of that 2003 cold December night when they were fleeing from a raid on the camps by the Royal Bhutanese Army:

> I can still hear the shrieks and cries of my comrade Deepila, who was from Bongaigaon, heavily pregnant, who failed to run and was raped and killed by the Army personnel. My heart is stifled as I remember blow by blow that moment. I looked back for her, but she had been overcome. They picked her up, there was no one to stop for her, and our own men too were running to save themselves. In the jungle you are alone, hunting and hunted... You are each to you

[46] See, Kanak Sen Deka, *Ulfar Swadhin Asom* (Ulfa's Independent Assam) Guwahati: Dispur Print House, 1994 and Samir Kumar Das, *ULFA. A Political Analysis,* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1994).

[47] Entry of 12 June 2003, in the diary of anonymous Enigma Base woman cadre.

> own. I was angry, frozen like a stone, but I ran nonstop, ran that night and the next day and I thought that if the worst came I would shoot myself for I carried my gun. Or, I must at least save someone else.[48]

These are names sadly footnoted to the unwritten history of ULFA that many women combatants carry as cross upon their later lives. Scarred by the brutality, she vowed to shoot herself if caught but never to give in to such atrocity. And yet, the violence of camp life did not blind her to the more enduring truths of ordinary life. Her quiet confession that she fell in love with a tough and respectable fellow combatant who embodied the integrity that the revolution meant to her comes through in an unguarded moment as the human story behind every fearless rebel. Her weakness even in the camp for the lipstick and the kajal belied the greater instinct of womanhood that prevailed over the warrior impulses. Love in the time of conflict is not frowned upon under the ULFA diktat and there is even provision for couples to marry within the outfit.

In ULFA's constitutional byelaws, there are clear and categoric regulations laid down for marriageable cadres of the outfit. In subsection (i) of the marriage byelaws under Section 5 of the Constitution, it is stated that the organisation recommends and patronises inter tribal marriages and inter community alliances. Further, it promotes and encourages members to marry 'destitute women cadres, raped or assaulted women and widows of insurgency' who have sacrificed much for the liberation of the 'nation'.[49] Like most insurgencies the gendered aspect of armed struggle creates obvious divisions even within ULFA. Yet unlike many other outfits in South Asia where women cadres are large in number, like the Maoists in Nepal where women make up a third of the membership or the LTTE, with a sixth being women militants who are part of suicide squads and carry out assassinations, the ULFA woman rebels despite her smaller representation enjoys on the face of it a greater degree of liberty with fewer risky operational responsibilities

[48] Entry of 28 December 2003. This was barely ten days after the RBA crackdown which began on 15 December.
[49] Constitutional Byelaws of ULFA. Unpublished, p. 29.

of a regular member.[50] Her position of relative freedom in the gender grid common to South-East Asian societies enables her, a space that cannot be easily suppressed even as she may not be equally empowered in the outfit's allocated positions of power and within its organisational rungs. This is perhaps truer of the roles women play in various ethnic communities whose greater social mobility, freedom and control of resources allow greater autonomy even within the private sphere as compared to those of caste Hindu category or upper class women. That the membership of female cadres in ULFA was predominantly constituted of women from ethnic groups such as the Ahoms, the Koch, the Morans and the Motoks, besides the Bodos, Kacharis, Rabhas, Deuris and Misings among other smaller tribal communities is an indicator of the neutralisation of disparities in gender roles.[51] Further this also reinforces the argument that for most of Assam as elsewhere in the northeast, fragments of society have lived with their own sense of 'ethnos', a factor that must have played in a major way into the politics of subnationalism.[52]

In the outfit's social structures too, the marriage laws framed by ULFA's constitution grant autonomy to the woman and her prior consent and desire for marriage is mandatory. There are no cases, as combatants themselves report, where women have been bullied into partnership or forced sex by men in the outfit and where there has been report of such assault or 'rape' the permanent council has ordered severe punishment and in one case, executed a cadre in the Bhutan camp in 2001.[53] Consensual liaison and sex is usually not taboo, as

[50] Rita Manchanda(ed.), *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency,* p. 22. See also, *Women, Security, South Asia.* (eds.), Farah Faizal and Swarna Rajagopalan (Sage Publications, 2005), p. 156.

[51] Meghali Khargharia, former combatant of ULFA, and physical trainer, in conversation with the author maintains that 70% of ULFA's women cadres are of 'ethnic' origin and belong to indigenous communities. (Guwahati, 7 December 2007).

[52] See Sanjib Baruah, *Postfrontier Blues: Toward a New Policy Framework for Northeast India*. Policy Studies#33. East West Center: Washington, 2007, for a better understanding of ethnic strands in claims for autonomy and homelands in Northeast India's rebellion against the nation.

[53] As reported in an interview with Shyamolee Gogoi, a former combatant who was arrested in Bhutan in 2003 and whose husband, Prakash Gogoi went missing in the Bhutan crackdown. (Guwahati, 26 January 2008).

sensational newspaper reports of the discovery of used contraceptives from one of the hideouts at the Lakhipathar camp in Upper Assam indicated way back in the 1990s.[54] What is noteworthy is that the decade of the 1990s did breed a kind of couple-dom, also familiar in other forms of armed struggle and revolutions in the western world. The Basque Nationalist Organisation of Spain which spearheaded the ETA in the 1960s made famous a brand of militancy in which most young revolutionaries managed to bring their girlfriends into the organisation as a result of which a certain trend of 'couple terrorism' flourished.[55] European labour market activities that increasingly included women also repeated the pattern in Spain's largest armed revolution and women gradually found their way into positions of leadership in the executive of ETA. Clearly, gender emancipation in the history of western modernity had obvious corresponding implications in the sphere of insurgency and guerrilla movements.

While ULFA certainly admitted more women in the later years, it however did not encourage their rise or greater participation in military activities. The three women who had the distinction of entering the executive and got appointed in 1995 as officers of the commisserate were Moni Hazarika, Meghali Khargharia, both Second Lieutenant and Shanti Rajkumari, all from the Upper Assam Sivasagar district known to be one of the dominant bases of ULFA's women recruits. Of them, the first two were also wives of equally able senior cadres, Satabda Kumar and Pallav Saikia, respectively. Rajkumari who rose to be Lieutenant in 1998 is widely known to have been favoured for being a close relative of the Chairman. These women have different stories to tell. The men, on the other hand, seem to now believe that the women 'slowed them down'.[56]

[54] Though the evidence of condoms does not necessarily point to illicit sex, a section of the local press did highlight the 'moral' question of ULFA's camp life and played up the image of hedonists under the garb of revolutionaries. The females who had been viewed as able warrior women were thus alternately also regarded as mere molls.

[55] Carrie Hamilton, "Gender Politics of Political Violence: Women Armed Activists of ETA", *Feminist Review*, Vol 86 (2007), p. 237.

[56] Jibon Goswami (now writer, Anurag Mahanta) in an interview with the author, 18 November 2011, Guwahati.

Moni Hazarika alias Pratibha Gogoi, wife of Satabda Kumar alias Jibon Goswami, disbanded ULFA Commander, a vocal and proud former combatant, is clear that freedom to her meant greater economic independence for Assam, regional autonomy and political powers that would aid development in the state. Her response to ULFA's demand for sovereignty is reasonably argued: "when we believed that Assam could be better independent we thought in a myopic manner. Homeland demands elsewhere and liberation from the country can only remain a wishful ideal. In reality this is rarely possible".[57] Yet, she certainly believes that the talks with the Centre must push for greater rights over people's resources and bring Assam at par with the developed states of India. Moni's balanced rationale is arguably rubbed off onto her by her husband Satabda Kumar's pragmatism, given that he is a full-time author and promoter of education in Sivasagar, now that he is out of the organisation, though he formally never surrendered. Reinvented as Anuraag Mahanta, his nom de plume, and now an emerging conflict writer, having penned his first novella in Assamese on the social dynamic of rebels across the borderlands, he is perhaps one classic example of the insurgent having made good and deemed respectable even in his new avatar. Mahanta, 43, straddles both worlds with the ease of one whose foray into revolution is seemingly a necessary education into the way of the frontier and frontiersmen.[58]

My conversation with this one time Commandant of ULFA's Bhutan camp and core member of the first group of cadres that trained in Kachin in 1989, and in neighbouring Bangladesh, is an eye opener. A B.Sc. student when he joined, belonging to an educated family, his father a Sanskrit teacher at Gaurisagar, Mahanta echoes the early ideologies of the outfit that petered out in the face of severe rifts and intra-organisational crisis. Hailing Arabinda Rajkhowa, the ULFA Chairman's initiative at getting women into the fold, he narrates how he visited every district scouting for probable women recruits into the outfit at a time when there was tremendous pressure from the Army

[57] Interview with Moni Hazarika, 25 December 2007.

[58] See for instance, a review of his semi-autobiographical novella , *Owlingor Jui*, in Rakhee Kalita, "Readings from No Man's Land", *Biblio,* Vol. XXIII, Nos 5&6, May–June (2008), pp. 17–18.

in the 1990s. The equanimity with which Mahanta looks back on his life in the underground world is conspicuous by its absence among the women, who are a resigned and, often, reticent lot.

Chayanika alias Pompy Bora, 33 now a householder and married to her villager friend is a shadow of her former self. Having trained in the Enigma Base camp at the Indo-Bhutan borders in 1997, her induction into the outfit was at the behest of a now surrendered cadre from around her home in Kujorbori in Nagaon district. Having walked for one whole week to the camp in Bhutan with an unexplained resolve to join ULFA and risen in its ranks to be an instructor of the basic training at the Enigma camp in the next year, Chayanika speaks haltingly of the past.[59] Memories of having served in the position of a Lance Corporal in 2001 and that she was considered an exemplary woman cadre capable of imparting lessons to males bring back the flash in her eye. But Chayanika is measured in speech and her words give away the conflict in her mind. She recounts her particularly stressful return to her village after she was bailed out in 2005 (from the 2003 Bhutan arrest) and her apprehensions about being under some invisible scanner make her cagey of speaking normally even several years later. Having dropped out of high school to join ULFA her attempts to go back and complete her education, once she had disbanded, was riddled by the scorn and suspicion of her neighbours. Either way she seemed to have lost the battle. Her rare physical stamina that made her easily complete 500 push ups daily while in the camp is today a half forgotten past. Reed thin and emaciated, her body racked by incessant bouts of coughing, Chayanika is clearly plagued by illness but defeated more by her frustration at not having lived the dream of 'a stable and peaceful Assam' and of a wasted youth.

Between Two Worlds

In a pattern that is nearly repeated by every woman combatant, surrendered, disbanded or demobilised, the women of ULFA have sad and, often, despairing stories to tell about the aftermath of conflict. Women formerly of the outfit, after having shed their uniform present

[59] In interviews with the author, in February and May 2007.

themselves unassumingly in insipid, domesticated roles, a far cry from what used to seem to be days of impassioned revolution. Widows, mothers, wives, sisters and girlfriends, they continue to ostensibly play nurturers of the community and preserve its norms from the enclaves in which they remain, never fully empowered nor wholly rehabbed. Like the women of Canterbury, these are quiet and silent witnesses. "For us there is no action...but only to wait and witness" and none demonstrates this truth better than the group of former activists, wives of some of the key leaders and military commanders of the Bhutan camp who went missing and never returned from the midnight raid of 15 December of 2003 by the Royal Bhutanese Army.

Hema Hansipi (Malini Ingtipi), Shyamolee Gogoi (Gyanoma Moran), Menaka Changmai (Meenakshi Changmai) , Manomati Barman (Kabita Chakraborty), Padumi Timungpi (Juri Ingtipi) and Anima Devi and a few others are the Bhutan 'war widows': yet they sport their brightly vermillioned foreheads in a rare and symbolic display of dissent and defiance.[60] These women together posed a threat to the credibility of the present government when Shyamoli's petition filed in 2005, followed by petitions by the rest of them demanding a *habeas corpus* of their missing husbands dragged on in the Gauhati High Court for a couple of years before being dismissed without any concrete judgement.[61] The group of women went on an indefinite fast in March 2007 to protest the unresolved issue of disappearance but their attempts to stage a more potent agitation was swiftly aborted. Clearly, their interests got undermined in the trade-off that the government sought with promises of compensation when civil society initiatives to fan the

[60] This is similar or imitative of the 'Red Tika' movement among widows in Nepal's Maoist practices in the Peoples' War which empowered them. Whether the same is true for ULFA women is debatable. See also, Anjana Shakya, "Social Impact of Armed Conflict in Nepal". (*Social Inclusion Research Fund*. May, 2009), p. 51.

[61] In an affidavit of the Indian Army deposited by Sandeep Sharma, Lieutenant of the JK Rifles at the Gauhati High Court on 24 April 2006, in response to the petition jointly made by these women, it was stated that "Bhutan is a sovereign state" and that the Indian Republic would have no claim on insurgents who had fallen on territory that was foreign. The plea was that there was "no hand over" of the said rebels to the Indian government and as such the grievances of the women could not be redressed. The case was thus declared dismissed.

protests seemed to threaten its own attempts to put a halt to the public demonstrations. The striking ULFA women pulled out and what had begun as a serious move for justice ended without resolving much.[62] Alone they remain vulnerable, having lost their former sense of rebellion and are reduced to lonely struggling widows who do not have the bonafide status of even claiming widowhood.

Shyamolee alias Gyanoma Moran is a 40 year old woman, belonging to the indigenous Moran community, settled mostly between the Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts of Upper Assam. Sensitive about her ethnic Assamese status, she is matriculate and a college dropout, a representative of the All Assam Moran Students' Union before she left home in Rupai Siding, Doomdooma to join the outfit.[63] A 'half widow' today, her husband Prakash Gogoi, alias Ponaram Dihingia, went missing and left her with their only child Atlanta. Shyamolee is an angry woman and talks more candidly than the others about the Bhutan days. Reminiscing about the camps, she clearly recalls the day when the 'Raja' (King Jigme Wangchuk of Bhutan) visited the ULFA camps and expressed his cooperation and help to the guerrilla warriors. Though the females, she clarifies, were not allowed to be present, her commentary on the royal visit is clearly based on facts shared by the male cadres. Details from her vivid memories are unwitting evidences of ULFA's organisational support and solidarity from the Bhutanese kingdom which is now contested. Until the Indian intervention and a bilateral agreement with Bhutan to flush out the rebels from the border camps the lives of ULFA cadres in the dragon country seemed almost an idyllic interlude. In fact one of the King's officers, Ogen Sonong (sic), of the Royal Bhutanese Army, a regular visitor to the camps and a friend of ULFA leaders is believed to have committed suicide after

[62] See 'India Human Rights Report (Asom)' , *Asian Center for Human Rights*. (2008). *www. achrweb.org/reports/india/AR08/asom.html*, accessed 15 Nov. 2011.

[63] At the behest of the demands made by the pro-talks ULFA, the Union Government of India has recently decided to grant Scheduled Tribes status to the Morans, among other communities such as the Motoks, Chutiyas, Tai Ahoms etc. See " Center agrees to protalks ULFA demand…" *The Times of India,* 6 July 2013.

the mass destruction by the RBA of the ULFA camps in 2003 and the elimination of some of its key leaders housed there.[64] Shyamolee's accounts of the chilling scenes of those last moments after which the leaders of ULFA's Bhutan camp, including her husband, disappeared are, however, tinged with a stoicism and the finality of resignation that is just as unnerving. Her husband, a victim whose remains, dead or alive, yet to be confirmed, lives on like a shadow with her. Her animosity toward some of the leaders who are instrumental in charting out a road to peace in post-conflict Assam is directed more at the breakup of the organisation into irreconcilable warring camps than to her own hapless state and future that is unaddressed by them. And yet, she bears with her an uncanny womanly instinct of the knowledge of being trapped by the twists of circumstances. Caught between two worlds, that of ex-combatants' destinies from a violent past these women cannot escape and the half promise of a new life waiting to be born, Shyamolee and her tribe of warrior women are consigned to an uncertainty from which relief seems only remotely possible.[65]

On the other side is Hema Hansipi, 39, wife of Ashanta Baghphukan, Ulfa's missing Political Commissar, reportedly arrested and eliminated by the Bhutanese Army. Hema, a resident of Morigaon, some 100 kilometers away from Guwahati, today struggles to educate her college-going daughter single-handedly. She runs a mixed poultry farm at home on little means, saving and counting each penny of her fifty thousand grant of compensation from the outfit that came her way after Bhutan. Sixteen year old Kareng, her only child, born in the Bhutan camp says that she tells off her college mates when they ask about her father who they have never seen by explaining that he is in some remote frontier land fighting for the Indian Army. Her ironic strategy for survival in a society worn thin by militarised forces, state and non-state, is indeed an index of the fragile fabric of its body politic.

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[64] Interview with Shyamolee Gogoi, 26 January 2007.

[65] In April 2007, the government of Assam promised to continue the search for the 'missing men' and ensure the welfare of the families of the victims. See for instance, Dolly Phukan, "Conceptualising Gender, Peace and Conflict: The Assam Case", in Wasbir Hussain (ed.) *Peace Tools and Conflict Nuances in India's Northeast*, (Guwahati: Wordweaves India 2010), pp. 228–229.

What endures then is the idea of a failed promise of the revolution in the camps. But as Judith Butler asks, in *Who Sings the Nation State*?, was the revolutionary moment itself a moment of false promise?[66] Moni Hazarika's unrealisable dream and her acceptance of the present indicate such a condition. Hema is closer to reality when she says that the idea of revolution needs to be manifested differently. Her own proximity to the smell of the earth and the actual turning of the wheels of life post-camp compels her to believe in the economic health of the nation. Her faith in an agrarian revolution, amidst the patch of greens and cabbages growing in her own backyard and the little pond of fish spawns, reinforces the glorious myth of the rebel dream. An armed struggle may not answer all the questions she ruminates, though. Her discontent with the way in which the 'missing men' issue of ULFA got suppressed led her to personally approach the ULFA Chairman, Arabinda Rajkhowa and make a fresh plea for its inclusion in the charter of demands advanced for peace talks with the government of India. That the women who symbolise the ongoing struggle of recovering key information on their missing spouses did not represent the peace negotiations in the recent deliberations since ULFA'S ceasefire in July 2011and are mostly invisible even today, is of course their lot that they have come to accept.[67]

The *Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibartan* (United National Convention), a citizens' peace brokering initiative formed in 2010 that pressed for a fair representation of the victims and issues in restoring peace and goodwill sought to remedy this in the past couple of years and included the issue of the missing cadres in the SJA convention held in Guwahati and other district centres.[68] As a civil society intervention, the role of SJA has been that of a much needed catalyst in the halting peace talks and may just be what can end the impasse.[69] Hema's experience in the

[66] Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010).

[67] Interview at Hema Hansipi's home. Morigaon. 8 October 2011.

[68] See, *The Assam Tribune*, 22 June 2010.

[69] See, for instance, Hiren Gohain, *Agnigorbho Asom aru Subha Uttaronor Prosestha,* Ashok Book Stall: Guwahati. 2010. This book in Assamese traces recent attempts by civil society in the state to broker peace and bring the rebel leaders and the governments at the center and in Assam back to the negotiating table. The need for women's representation in these initiatives is also a concern of the SJA.

wilderness has however prepared her for exigencies beyond her control and she does not hope for an ideal resolution of the conflict. Yet, she is pragmatic and says bravely, "what we need is a media awareness of our problems and the right and honest leaders to steer us through".[70] Clearly, for Hema a new definition of 'freedom' begs to be constructed.

Escape from Freedom

In the struggle to seek freedom from the nation, Moni and those of her ilk, unwittingly call for a 'new nationalism'.[71] ULFA's freedom song however, even when it cries for liberation, is in rhetorical terms only reiterating the nation, though in ways that are not authorised. In the cease fire camps that are designated to house cadres at bases like Kakopathar in Tinsukia district and at Nalbari in lower Assam, there are stories of desperation and the camp is only another prison house. Leaders of the pro-talks group of ULFA huddle to organise strategies within the outfit but peace brokering too has taken a toll. Men escape the walls as they seek freedom from what seems an endless exercise in waiting. While Delhi is in locked rounds of ceaseless negotiations over the last four years with the moderate factions of the outfit eager to find a political resolution, the camps are in severe distress with little food and even less inspiration or faith. And once again women bear the brunt with children and other exigencies that trap them. Maradona Russel and Monalisa in the Myanmar camp is a couple whose escape to freedom hit the headlines about four years ago.[72] While Maradona alias Naren Rai escaped to Tinsukia in Upper Assam his wife, a Pamei Naga of Myanmarese origin had to covertly seek the Army's help and trek the jungles of Myanmar three nights to cross the border to her husband who waited at an Army Mountains Division base in Dinjan Cantonment. It is common knowledge that cadres trying to escape are shot down and in recent times there have been cases of such killings in the borders within the camps. The price Monalisa had to pay was the terrible cost of leaving behind her infant child in the care of a relative in the camp.

[70] Hema Hansipi. 8 October 2011.
[71] *Who Sings the Nation-State?* p. 61.
[72] *The Telegraph*, "Great Escape from Ulfa Jaws", 17 October 2008.

In what was one of the darkest chapters of the ULFA, more stories of women and children were impacted in the wake of the Bhutan crackdown, with more than two dozen women losing their husbands and at least ten men who went missing, including six whose wives continue to wait for justice and a confirmation of the death of their husbands. The ULFA has included a clarification of this in the 37 page 'Charter of Demands' that forms a staple of the peace talks currently underway.[73] Yet while the men have become heroes of revolution, despite the fall in the social support bases over the last decade, in the post conflict scenario, the women have disappeared, some into desired anonymity, others into domesticity and most others who lead silent lives of suffering and loneliness. Civil society mechanisms or state volunteered programmes to render truth, justice and reparations in the aftermath of violence and conflict are sometimes half-hearted and lopsided for combatants or ex-combatants are often perceived as 'spoilers of peace', as Hema Hansipi rues.[74] Hema's cynicism is not unfounded for even after nine long years of the disappearance of her husband and his allies in the outfit, the legal apparatus that undertook to find out and offer a final report on the whereabouts of the missing men remained inconclusive.

The findings of the Enquiry Commission in Assam with regard to another dark chapter of insurgency, ULFA's secret killings conducted from 2006 to 2008 under Justice K.N. Saikia also remained without substantive judgment for what was admitted as 'want of effective direct evidence' despite 35 officially listed murders.[75] Widows who protest are not heard seriously and get off with very little compensation either from the state or from the outfit. Access to protection, services or legal remedies are 'woefully inadequate' making it 'nearly impossible to seek redress from government entities' a global fact-finding team reports.[76] Transitional justice for women who donned the uniform and held guns alongside the men once is almost an unheard concept in the

[73] Report by the civil society initiative, *SJA* (*Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibartan*) Guwahati. Unpublished.
[74] In an interview with author. 8 October 2011.
[75] *Report on the K.N. Saikia Commission on the Secret Killings* submitted to the Govt. of Assam. 21 August 2006, pp. 75–93.
[76] Report by *UNIFEM*, "Women, War and Peace", 2001, p. 17.

state and the men who matter in ULFA's political tangle with the Centre have relegated these women to an inconsequential position that will perhaps someday get footnoted to the history of Assam's thirty-year long insurgency. As Michel Foucault argues in his famous lectures on apparatuses of security, we live in an era of the "governmentalisation of the state" and it may be a very hard and long battle for the rebels to break into this governmentality and its complex modes of power , and seek justice and civil rights once they have abjured the path of resistance and violence.[77]

The Road from Here

When conflict societies move from hostility and direct warfare to transit into times of peacemaking towards resolution and redressal of grievances there are certain structures that need to be in place. For, every such period of aggression and difference is invariably attended by violence and deep mistrust between the parties, state and non-state actors that are stakeholders. In Assam, the cessation of armed warfare by the pro-peace faction of ULFA's leadership declared unilateral cease fire on 12 July 2011, to pave the way for smooth conduct of "political negotiations with the government of India".[78] More than a year on from that formal declaration, the state is yet to constitute 'Truth and Reconciliation Commissions' or even 'Disappearance Commissions' that may compassionately view the victims' versions of affliction and reparation thereof.

In most armed conflicts and cases of state violence the war on terror and prison camps re-emerge in the form of aggressive methods of coercion in which the resultant precariousness of lives becomes a serious ethical concern in society.[79] Judith Butler's long drawn

[77] *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality.* Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds.). University of Chicago Press: 1999 (87–104). Foucault's essay in this collection clearly anticipates the contemporary contestations of the practice of 'governance' that the state has been normatively associated with, for example, in earlier dispensations in post-independent India.
[78] Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa in an email to press, in *The Assam Tribune*, 13 July 2011.
[79] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso. 2010).

engagement with the question of ethics and her political philosophy of non-violence is particularly useful in understanding the psychological outcome of conflict. As she finely argues, "when lives are lost, (we) are often given numbers, but these stories are repeated everyday and the repetition appears endless, irremediable", and is perhaps in the end, irrelevant.[80] In this frightening perpetuation of violence, precariousness of life is what faces us and in such moments of reality the 'grievability' of lives lost, destroyed or damaged irreparably is proportionately lowered.

As Assam looks back on three long decades of conflict and the violence that ensued, the women, who suffered most grievously in armed combat and as a result of it, need to speak their truth for rightful intervention and compensation. But then as international agencies such as the UN Women South Asia plead, societies of violence in India must have recognition as officially-deemed conflict zones to be able to seek implementation of women's justice, protection and empowerment in situations of armed conflict.[81] While the United Nation's Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted in 2000 undertakes to 'reaffirm the role of women and girls in promoting peace and their participation in conflict resolution and toward maintenance of peace and security', the non-implementation of these directives in highly sensitive conflict areas such as India's Northeast hardly leaves much room for justice and compensation to women in armed conflict.[82] Left to the devices of the state, its vulnerable subjects are not likely to have the wherewithal to press for their welfare or even hope for a safer future.

Rather, the Shyamolees and Hemas of a post-ULFA dispensation are women who have been chased away into obscurity with little or

[80] Ibid., p. 13.

[81] Report on Proceedings of the *Peace Research Institute of Oslo* (PRIO) workshop on "Women, Security and Peace in the Northeast" at Shillong, 3–4 August, 2012 in which a presentation of UN Women, South Asia, a United Nations advocacy wing, brought to the table the limitations of assuring 'transitional justice' to women in security and in conditions of 'violence against women' in the region. Attended by author.

[82] *http:/www.un.org/events/res_1325.epdf,* accessed 12 Jan. 2012.

no audience to listen to their narratives of truth about war and peace, violence and security. If there is tangible reparation consequent on that truth and if vulnerability can be quantified, as most post-conflict societies mandatorily need to do, then the cause the women warriors took up in their fight for 'freedom', both within and outside the organization, will be justified. The women of ULFA may be reduced to an irrelevance in most of the technical discussions of peace making and conflict resolution, as many peace processes elsewhere too have already demonstrated in conflict zones across the world. Only very recently a package announced by the government of Assam promises to look at the case of widows and destitutes and offers a new mode of post-conflict restoration in the state.[83] While the ULFA women continue to struggle for their visibility in the aftermath of rebellion, compensations urged by civil society initiatives in the time of peace and the conciliatory mood of the state may at least ensure that the lost lives of their kin, and the half-lives they themselves lead, will probably have found some poetic justice after all.

[83] In a fresh bid to recover some of its lost ground in framing counterinsurgency approaches and combating violence in the state, the government has adopted new post-conflict measures. Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi, has just undertaken to rehabilitate widows and victims of militancy, including children and orphans of rebels, even as peace negotiations are afoot between the Center and the insurgent outfits. See, for instance *The Times of India,* 28 July, 2013.