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Rumour, Rhetoric, Rebellion: Negotiating the Archive and the Witness in Assam*

Rakhee Kalita Moral

Coherence is seductive for the narrative form but disparities are, from an ethnographic perspective, more compelling

The last part of the twentieth century witnessed unprecedented civil and social revolt in India's northeast. In Assam the general air of resistance was struck by the historic students' movement of the 1980s against what was seen as illegal immigration from across the borders unsettling the demographics and, consequently, the economy of the state. Running almost parallel to this student upsurge was a slowly simmering confrontation with the state by a self-styled rebel outfit *Sanjukta Asom Mukti Bahini,* or more popularly, The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Located in the remote and far-flung hilly terrain of the country's north-eastern corner, Assam, it helps to note, is flanked predominantly by international borders with its territorial boundaries shared by China–Tibet, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. In a large sense the period marked the enactment of a new history of revolution and extremist struggle attended by the rise of an interesting variety of social phenomena transforming contemporary Assam and the way it is viewed today (Gohain 1996; Baruah1999; Misra 2004; Prabhakara 2006). While the neighbouring Naga struggle for liberation from the Indian state is officially the longest insurgency in the country and dates back to the nation's independence, Assam's own war against what the organization

* Revised version of the presentation made in the international conference on *The Long Indian Century*: *Historical Transitions and Social Transformations*, at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, July 2–4, 2014.

calls "oppression by a colonial state" actually originates in a long rebel history of the sub region which is, however, shrouded in myth and memory. The term 'oppression' rings with striking resonance in debates and discussions on India's northeast and is a keyword in every serious attempt to understand the origins of insurgent revolt in the region.[1]

The present discussion attempts to chart the trajectory of such a rebellion, issuing out of collective resentment and perceptions of aggrievement that drove the native emotions of a people into agency for revolt and separatist movements. In taking stock of how the rebellion swayed and held popular opinion in its favour for almost a decade before plummeting into decline, and consequently, a disconnect with the ordinary Assamese I look at the interesting contemporary discourse that has developed challenging some of the conventional assumptions and historical knowledge of the state and its people. Feeding these new narratives and epistemologies is a set of popular rumours that thrived during the times of turmoil, almost as an alternative intellectual history of the common man which was, in many ways, an attempt to understand "…the attitudes, assumptions and implicit ideologies of specific social groups…" as it were. (*Histoire des mentalites*). Through the eighties and nineties, for the most part such repugnance over the center's indifference had spilled over to collective action manifest in violence and insurgent uprisings throughout the state. I devote the first part of this reading of history and historiography in contemporary Assam to the emergence of a body of rumours, imagined truths, or critical hunches that proved more reliable than facts in times of trouble.

[1] In *Swadhinata*, April 1989, Special Publicity Pamphlet of the ULFA on its Tenth Anniversary, Uddipta Hazarika (ed.). *Doi Kao Rong*. The outfit regularly released its mouthpiece in which the activities of ULFA were listed, apart from issuing ideological statements and facts about the state, viewed as being marginal to the nation. Curiously, the masthead of these pamphlets besides featuring the symbol of a blazing red sun, the logo of the rebel organization also carried the name of a mythic place, Doi Kao Rong, idealized in ULFA's utopian imagination as the fabled golden land of peace, prosperity, and freedom.

These often emanated from a general distrust of the government and its machinery with whom the rebels were at war and led up to key information often obscured by the state. Thus between a watchful state and a rebellious uprising, the contemporary discourse offered hints and clues about how the polity was governed, what its general aspirations were, and how the radical and dissenting sections reacted to them and sought to sway political and social opinion in the state. As a theoretical premise, the evolving discourse negotiating between a remembered history of the people and popular opinion on the rebellion, is one that reveals manoeuvrings and manipulation by a media that also wilfully sometimes under-reported or often hyped the role of the rebels in the political disturbances, social agitation, and consequent mayhem that ensued throughout the state in the crucial decades of the 1980s and 1990s.

I

In its theoretical scope, the idea of reading rumours and contemporary lore as an expanded archive or even as contesting archival knowledge which is now seen primarily as a colonial apparatus—a global system of domination intended to control territory by producing and consuming information, is not very new. That the archive was also contentious and often a site of contradictions and epistemic anxieties seems to spill over to collective memory and into historical consciousness when the future begins to write itself. (Robert Darnton 1978; Thomas Richards 1992; Ann Stoler 2009). Unravelling the archive—hidden, submerged or encrypted—involves the imperative of reading disparate information and frames in which events were understood, interpreted, and reported.

The archive must be then understood, as "sum total of the known and knowable", not simply a physical building like the British Museum or any other archive, for instance, with its own collection of authorized texts and documents, the academic temple, but a collective imagined junction of all that is known and knowable, a fantastic epistemological master pattern where

heteregenous local knowledge intersects those of empire and the metropole. I choose to hark back to the premise that local knowledge in something like the typically Geertzean terms is not about creating "dynamic centers of awareness, emotion and judgment…"but from the native's point of view about cultures and unique selfhoods that may not quite imitate the Western cultural idea of a person as a bounded individual with an integrated cognitive universe (Geertz 1993). It is, as has been well argued by Geertz, the key to social identities that are attributes borrowed from their cultural settings, their geographies and reigning metaphors of life and living. Thus the discourse erected primarily over decades of conflict in the region becomes an interesting tipping point in the knowledge edifice that has traditionally been ascribed to Assam, the gaps and uncertainties of which come into sharp relief when confronted by practices, experiences, and events and their narratives that are, often, sites of contradiction and contestation.

In the Buchanan–Hamilton Manuscripts deposited to the India Office Library, papers on the economic, political, and social history of the Eastern provinces of Assam, Bengal, and Bihar under British rule form a part of that archival record which reveals not just an overarching panoptic gaze of the imperial state but also the uncertain knowledge of those who governed. Equally pertinent is the widely circulated twenty-first century theory that certain peoples themselves escape governing, and elude the state, or remain stateless, as it were, which was made famous by James Scott's "anarchist history" of Southeast Asia in studies on the region.[2] Yet in the colonial period, it is only a truism that there were tireless ethnographic and anthropological endeavours to script histories of the natives the British governed—and label, slot and, stereotype them for posterity. Following a survey from 1808 to 1814, Dr Hamilton of the East India Company, commissioned to write this report, had sourced much material that is self admittedly "mainly from Assamese fugitives in Bengal and

[2] See, James C Scott, 2009, *The Art of Not Being Governed,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Bengali visitors to Assam" (historian and Ahom antiquarianist, SK Bhuyan's Preface to Hamilton's *An Account of Assam*, 1940), for what was cited as inability to enter the territory of Assam then ruled by Ahom princes. In recounting some of the stories regarding the origin of the Assamese race corresponding to the Ahom dynasty's long reign prior to imperial occupation in 1826 Hamilton writes:

> Hitherto the Assamese had been a warlike and enterprising race, while their princes had preserved a vigour that in the East is not commonly retained for so many generations but their subjection to the Brahmanas, which was followed by that of most of the nation, soon produced the usual imbecility, and the nation has sunk into the most abject pusillanimity towards strangers and into internal confusion and turbulence…. (*Account of Assam*, 8)

Hamilton's notions echo other imperial ethnographies like the first commissioner of Assam, David Scott's *Memoir* (1831), stretching from the critical period of 1823 to the final years that led to Assam's annexation by the British from Burmese dominion in 1826. The impressions the colonials had gathered varied from reports written with empathy:

> What made Assam in history a flourishing state was a manly and numerous population, competing healthily in their occupations of agriculture and trade…there exist, however, scattered throughout Assam, in deep poverty, and care, many sons of families of distinction, under their own ancient regime, fallen from their estate, during and after, the confusions of the Burmese invasion. (White, 220–21)

to more blatantly self-aggrandising accounts like these:

> The frontier line of hills…are inhabited by races more or less uncivilized, differing from each other in language, dress and customs...no natural courage or activity can render an assemblage of wild villagers armed only with bows and spears a match for European science and discipline…. (226)

or, still those extolling the benefits reaped for being newly annexed to the British Empire after the Expulsion of the Burmese among which rests the

> ...fair valley of the Brahmaputra, the kingdom of Assam, or the unrivalled, which has since experienced the blessing of tranquillity and begun to reassume the prosperous condition which the remains of roads, tanks, bridges and temples make manifest that she formerly enjoyed. (213)

Clearly these are partial truths, epistemic confusions about troubled times, or what Stoler in her recent seminal rereading of the archive calls "…undigested bits of information and discrepant stories (that) provide ethnographic entry into the confused spaces in which people lived…". She argues that "…colonial scholars need to move from archive-as- source to archive-as-subject…" and that they should view archives not "…as sites of knowledge retrieval, but of knowledge production, as monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography…" (2002). This necessarily shapes much of the received wisdom about places and peoples whose histories are then fashioned and refashioned over later periods when political dissent and questions about credibility of the state, colonial and postcolonial, direct new enquiries about and challenge those archives. Earlier, Stoler has contended that in dealing with histories that belong in a larger colonial/ postcolonial duree, it is desirable to go "beyond the official/state apparatuses, to one peopled by agents whose imaginings propelled their actions, a perspective in which fact with fantasy together constituted the realising of violence and what were deemed appropriate measures to cover it"(1992).[3]

Historians ranging from the conservative S.K. Bhuyan (*Anglo Assamese Relations* 1933 is sprinkled with a fair dash of admiration for the British) to the more radical left views of a later day Amalendu Guha who blights that imperial grandeur with his Marxist analysis of Assam's grave economic decline under

[3] Stoler, 1992, "In Cold Blood: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives", *Representations.* Vol . 37 (Winter) pp. 151–152.

imperial rule in his influential *From Planter Raj to Swaraj* (1976) make possible the understanding of the Assamese as being deeply inflected by the diverse socio political contexts of their experience. In Adam White's report there is a candid account of the imperial design:

> Under the liberal and general administration, the province will become an attractive field for western enterprise and speculation, notwithstanding the scarcity of the coolie labour ….(242)

The attempt to smoothen out incompatible versions about its history therefore would be to overwrite the critical moments of the twentieth century and the contemporary present in which they were being relooked at. The ruptures and fault lines of a colonial state overtaken by the hasty and sometimes not too farsighted attempts to integrate a peripheral region into the body politic of a new nation–state had consequences that were far reaching and are deeply intertwined with the contemporary anxieties of the rebel country that India's northeast has come to assume.

To be sure, ULFA views "…independent India's relationship with Assam as a colonial one…" (Sanjib Baruah 2007) and it is not difficult to trace the early anti-colonial/ nationalist politics of this rebel group to a body of writings that easily constituted the officially accredited knowledge of Assam's political and cultural history in the early twentieth century. Edward Gait's historiography is replete with details of the rather troubling events leading to what is termed the Annexation of Assam by the British and this was *the* moment of early rebellion that social theorists believe is crucial to dissent and the stirrings of subnationalist emotions among the people of the state in a later age in response to its colonial history. (*The Assam State Gazetteer*, 142–143).

In its statements to the regional press and other civil society institutions the insurgent outfit ULFA, therefore, refused to acknowledge itself and the Assamese as belonging to the Indian mainland and cited the 'Yandaboo Peace Treaty' signed in 1826

by the East India Company and the Burmese King of Ava who had control over the principality of Assam as a watershed in its colonial history. The Burmese rule over Assam (1821–24) had generated its own vocabulary of oppression and torture and the phrase "Mannor Oityachar" was a byword for a period of terror equivalent to the Dark Ages that littered the folk memory of its people. Colonial reports too often cited with vicarious detail the inhuman and unimagined horrors of the atrocities the Burmese committed upon the Assamese people. (in Scott's *Memoir*) . The escape from such a regime was welcome for the Assamese and the British naturally took credit for the Anglo–Burmese war of 1824 that ended the Burmese siege over Assam and parts of Bengal but the euphoria obviously was not to last very long. 'Yandaboo' began to assume new critical resonance and enriched significance for a postcolonial generation and was no longer just a memorable date and a name enshrined in history books. The Tenth Foundation Day Pamphlet of ULFA, widely circulated across the state, announced that its goal was to 'restore Assam's lost independence' following its unlawful occupation by the British more than a hundred and fifty years ago, and vouched to create an "atmosphere for developing integrity among its many indigenous races and tribes" in order to establish a "sovereign independent Asom" (in Publicity pamphlet from *Doi Kao Rong,* Uddipta Hazarika, ed.). This was arguably a bold stance and separate in its political ramifications from that of the student movement's efforts to push out immigrants and the non Assamese from the state and perhaps the reason why it accommodated people from across communities and ethnic groups in the state. In invoking the Yandaboo Treaty in their Constitution the ULFA sought to refresh forgotten promises made by the British to simply administer the principality of Assam that the Burmese had ceded to them and not appropriate it. (Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826)[4]. In what must be regarded as a critical rereading of the archive, the banned outfit had inserted its own postcolonial marginalia on a

[4] In the Treaty of Yandaboo signed on February 24, 1826, it was stated that "His Majesty the King of Ava renounces all claims upon, and will abstain from all future interference with, the principality of Assam and its dependencies…" (Appendix in Manoj Nath, 2013, *ULFA: Xeujia Xopon, Tejronga Itihax,* Guwahati: Aank Baak).

document that had long authorized British imperial dominion over Assam. These contestations suggest a dynamic archive that admits new thoughts and possibilities in the understanding of India's northeastern history. In recent times the attempt to reread this colonial past has resulted in uncovering new material and documentation or inaccessible colonial papers, recovering vital administrative policy records that point towards silences and suppressed information, challenging historians to write and rethink the social history of the region.[5]

ULFA's attempt at translating its long cherished aspiration of a *Swadhin Asom* (independent Assam) however treaded the messy ground between reason and sentiment giving currency to a rhetoric of coercion and conviction about an impossible dream. It clearly counted most immediately upon the bruised emotions and affect of a people who saw itself as marginal in the nation–state's race for development and relevance and harked back to the safety of its precolonial past. 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…' (*EPW* 1981). ULFA's central assumptions about closing that gap rested largely on such a rhetoric of rebellion and revolution to wrest what was perceived as rightfully theirs. In fact the temptation 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. Gohain has repeatedly warned against the perils of such

[5] David Syiemlieh, 2014, *On the Edge of Empire, Four British Plans for North East India 1941–1947,* New Delhi: Sage Publications. The compilation of such colonial documents warrants renewed critical attention to the writing of histories of the region while reiterating the broadly held contemporary claims of production of colonial knowledge in India. See, also, for instance, Bernard S Cohn, 1996. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

thinking, and made clear the distinctions between a romantic rebellion and what in his mind had the makings of the true revolution. Yet it may be difficult to deny the pulls of more deep seated Assamese cultural roots and its proximity to the idea of a regional *weltanschauung* that largely pervaded the mind of the rebels across the northeastern frontiers. That 'militarised spaces of mistrust and confrontation' need to give way to larger spaces of cooperation and collaboration for the development of the people of the region has been, arguably, also cause for angst among the people of India's northeast.[6] This, notably, also fed on an earlier moment in Assam's political life that remained deeply embedded in the Assamese nationalist sentiment as a wart: the 1946 Cabinet Mission that failed and the prickly groupings subsequently led by Nehru's Interim government under the newly devised plans for Transfer of Powers to independent India that he self-admittedly considered "injurious" to Assam, and the North West frontier provinces of the country.[7]

ULFA's brave ambition thus to liberate Asom from its grim destiny unfolded in a dramatically public manner that involved in various degrees, the participation of intellectuals, social critics, writers and artists, a large section of the regional media, and even certain bold officials of the state machinery apart from, and most importantly, an overwhelmingly large rural and semi-rural base. In a sense, the latter was the collective, the crowd of Ranajit Guha on whom individuation was impossible: the revolution was of a people, or so the outfit imagined, flawed though the imaginary was. Unlike Guha's colonial peasant here was however not a pre-political uprising but a planned, strategic idea of how a mass protest and revolt could be effected (*Elementary Aspects* 1983). Equipped with the ideology of iconic revolutionaries the ULFA romanced simultaneously the haunting spirits of Che, Mao

[6] Sanjib Baruah, 2007, "Postfrontier Blues, Toward a New Policy Framework for Northeast India", Policy Studies 33. Washington: East-West Centre: p ix.
[7] Arupjyoti Saikia, "Assam, Nehru and the Creation of India's Eastern Frontier, 1946–1950s" NMML, *Occasional Paper*, History and Society New Series, S.No. 78.

Zedong, and the fiery Naxalite neighbours from Bengal among other role models amassing popular support from the young and the old, as it purported to strike a new wave of armed resistance and dissent, grandiosely waging war against an authoritarian and 'colonial' Indian state. Rumour in this situation served as both organ and mobiliser of protest, by virtue of its character as a type of expression or speech that became the most 'natural'and indeed most indispensable vehicle of insurgency (Guha, 256). A 'conversation of rumours' soon took over the decades of the eighties and early nineties, a period that saw the rise of ULFA's extremist activities, whether they were kidnappings of top bureaucrats or corporates, robberies and extortions, bombings and murders. (I borrow this term from Anand Yang's fascinating research on nineteenth-century peasants in Bihar whose peculiar conditions and ambiguous situations resulted in a proliferation of rumour and lore that gave expression to collective attitudes towards colonial powers.)[8]

Curiously, many of these events found empathy with the vernacular media, even as impassioned debates about the ethics driving the insurgency swarmed thick in campuses, politicians' meetings, corporate boardrooms and social circuits where many of the outfit's leaders came to be identified as "our boys" (Hiteswar Saikia, former chief minister of Assam often referred to the rebels of ULFA as such). Perhaps integral to this idea of kinship with a non-state organization lay in the fact that most of the ULFA cadres were young collegiates or dropouts, apart from a handful of graduates and professionals comprising the top rung, who could be the polite boy from the neighbourhood who simply vanished one day. The ULFA was banned and declared unlawful in November 1990 under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. College campuses in the mid eighties and early nineties were rife with rumours, for instance, that x or y, and not any anonymous faceless youth, had joined the outfit. As a college student in those

[8] Anand A Yang, "A Conversation of Rumors: The Language of Popular Mentalites in Late Nineteenth-Century Colonial India." *Journal of Social History* 20 , # 3 (Spring 1987): 485–505.

years it was not uncommon sometimes to discover that bright young boys who disappeared from the campus over the long summer months had actually gone over to the other side and joined the rebel outfit. Gossip often swirled in campus hostels on how, for instance, the leadership of the rebel group had met a bunch of young undergraduates in undisclosed venues and had briefed them on the political views and strategies of ULFA. Sometimes there were rumours that the cousin or a brother, of a top rung rebel operated as a link to other overground sympathizers in college. Allies, associates, and aides of rebels, thus, easily got identified during this period and curiosity about them was not unnatural or frowned upon. ULFA's close alliance and affiliations with Assam's rural base was self-evident in the wide scale participation of entire villages in the *shraddhs* (funeral rites) of its slain cadres and the public mourning that usually followed.[9]

It is useful to remember that ULFA touched the lives of not only ordinary men and women but critically affected the oil industry, tea corporates, government departments, and business communities. When President's rule was imposed in Assam on 27 November 1990 the outfit had already been warned about imminent crackdowns on their camps under the armyled operations. A good ten days ago, Paresh Baruah, ULFA Commander-in-Chief, had issued his diktat to several of these rebel camps in Upper Assam to be evacuated. During the 1990–91 counterinsurgency operations led by the Indian army along with the state apparatus, rumours typically floated about how often the outfit was tipped off by local sympathisers or even police personnel from the Assam government on the modus operandi of the counterinsurgency moves. (Hazarika 1994). It is a well-known fact that the rebels abandoned the Lakhipathar camp of the Tinsukia district of Upper Assam after being alerted by one such missive and when the army arrived at the camps there were only deserted shacks, a few arms and ammunition, and some incriminating documents that greeted them as tell tale signs of

[9] Udayon Misra, 2000, *The Periphery Strikes Back, Challenges to the Nation–State in Assam and Nagaland,* Shimla: IIAS.

the inhabitants of the dense and deeply forested area. A particularly gripping story that was flashed in the national media at that time was the discovery of mass graves in Lakhipathar and in Soraipung near Digboi which the army alleged were of those people that ULFA had kidnapped, tortured, and later eliminated, thus ascribing to the outfit a "culture of intolerance" that has been much debated in the ordinary man's responses to the rebellion and its ideology.[10] Sources from ULFA also claim that some of these were probably the bodies of victims that the rebel leadership had executed.

Significant also to these events was the identities of many of the young men and a few women around whom centrally the stories of the ULFA were woven and it was not uncommon to talk of Siddhartha Phukan, Kalpajyoti Neog, Saurav Gogoi, Shristi Sharma, or the legendary Hirakjyoti Mahanta, a Deputy Commandant of ULFA who was killed in Guwahati by counterinsurgency forces during Operation Rhino in January 1992. If there was epistemic anxiety about how a people's history was to be penned, what events and experiences were to populate which narratives, there was also clearly a constant intersection of "grids of intelligibility" and "regimes of truth" in which truth claims were tossed aside by counterclaims that sought their place in the discourse on insurgency in the state. A critical factor that played into the making of a "state of exception" in this region, namely the prevalence of black laws such as the Armed forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) to combat militancy, lends to a discourse which ceaselessly questions modern state power and reconsiders the space of the "citizen" in embattled zones of aggression and conflict where provisional measures become working paradigms of the state. Pitting sovereign power against "bare life", the official

[10] Uddipan Dutta, 2008, *Creating Robin Hoods: The Insurgency of the ULFA in its Early Period, its Parallel Administration and the Role of the Vernacular Press*, 1985–1990. Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP), p. 38.
See also, Giorgio Agamben, 2008, *State of Exception,* (trans. Kevin Attell), Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press ; and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (trans. Daniel Heller – Roazen), 1998.

narratives of insurgent northeast India, and specifically Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, gradually turned into an unapologetic and mechanical inventory of figures and "encounter killings", regimes of silence, which were challenged by insistent and indignant civil society voices that demanded the truths behind what in reality were "extra judicial killings", fake encounters, and gross human rights violations (Agamben 1998). The notion of a raw power and bare life, after Agamben's now famous formulation of *homo sacer*, attends the figure of the non-state subject whose capacity to be killed constitutes him as the political body around whom rumours grow thick and fly in the community. The fragile precariousness of such a subject in turn amplifies the sovereign power of the state creating an easy binary of tension that prevails in the time of conflict, a condition that is attested to in the responses from civil society and democratic forums to such violations. It is within this Foucauldian archaeology of knowledge and power that I suggest an alternative archive slowly came into being displacing and extending the literary and cultural canons within which ULFA's contemporary history and by extension Assam's socio political discourse came to be scripted in the public sphere.

II

In this second section I shall try and unpack this contemporary archive made up of a corpus of writings, reportage, memories, lores, literature—and even silences, and thus of a whole social dynamic that animates the political energies and responses of civil society in Assam to the critical transition it experienced. Poets and artists, Paul Ricouer had suggested, "tell of things as might be" while historians of "things that have been" and Stoler in her seminal work has drawn attention to this combine of a force field, recalling Martin Jay's "force fields" and a collection and collating of sensitive documents in her study of the archive (Ricouer 1984; Stoler 2009). I may like to argue that in a manner reminiscent of such colonial transactions the emerging discourse of the 1980s and 1990s that witnessed militancy at its height in Assam also negotiated similar folds of claims and counterclaims as it manouvered the hierarchies of credibility to register testimonies

of what had happened and whose authentic voices were being recorded in it. There were obviously competing claims from the reticent official records in a typical practice of bureaucratese that steadily countered the vociferous volleys of protest and outrage in the large local media for the excesses perpetrated by the state apparatuses during the counterinsurgency operations of the early 1990s. Assam boasts of a large number of small newspapers, weeklies, and dailies besides little magazines that are available in regional languages, which contributed richly to the debates and discourse of the rebellion of the 1990s. A third, and what I consider more significant, source of information on and interpretation of the times came from the political observer, unaffiliated thinker, social critic, poet/writer, even members of the ordinary citizenry who animate this archival space more boldly than ever, unafraid of state or rebel. She is the witness, standing, as it were, outside both, absorbing the violence, the horror, and the changing ethos while writing the times directly and indirectly. This is the neutral figure, who is critical of the historiography of the time and the archives that constitute it. I consider this figure a key link between the history and its rewriting, a voice, sometimes articulate sometimes silent, but always present sentinel-like watching the transition from the moment of strife to the moment of its evaluation. In evoking the "witness" in this discussion, I bear in mind recent seminal works on the role of testimony and witnessing in much greater catastrophes such as the Holocaust, and the unforgettable experience of human brutality in those dark times. Georgio Agamben's important comment that such events often lead to an aporia of historical knowledge, and what he calls, "a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension" is also telling for its validity in moments of violence and mass resistance movements such as the rebellion in Assam and the incredulous that often appeared to hold its own during the various events and incidents that marked its bumpy trajectory over three decades.[11] Yet significantly, the witness who

[11] Giorgio Agamben, 2002 (1999) *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive, (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen),*New York: Zone Books, p 12. See also, Michael Ignatieff, 'The Art of Witness' , *The New York Review of Books* XLII (5), March 1995.

stood outside this zone of uncertainty and violence, even while being affected by it, collated the facts and contributed richly to the emerging discourse, confronting it, challenging it and sometimes corroborating it with the truth of the times. I argue that this witness is a valuable piece of the archive, constituting the observer's gaze, at the random descent of chaos in the neighbourhood, the emptying of homes or, worse, the sudden disappearance of friends and acquaintances. The witness is, more critically than ever, spectator to the politics of fear, to the fear of the multitude, the fanatical crowd, to hatred, hostilities and the inherent violence that breed in such societies of dissent and discontent. She has sometimes also been viewed as an unwitting participant in the horror she analyses being unable to "do something" to prevent this growing culture of violence.[12] I would rather contend that the witness is an agent of change, a definitive part of its history, adding to the contemporary archive and whose responses viewed from a distance confirm her active political role in expressing her indignation at acts of violence by both, rebels and the state. In the case of ULFA, however, there are testimonies that also come from being directly part of the violence. The voices of rebels and former insurgents, which are testimonies in the real sense, animate the archive as I shall have occasion to elaborate upon, later in the discussion.

A fact-finding report on the role of the press during this period, reveals the contesting narratives about ULFA in the first two decades of its existence: one that the media tacitly supported and therefore selectively reported the banned outfit's activities; the other that there were threats issued by the rebel group and coercions on the press to suppress damaging information. On July 25, 1986 ULFA issued a warning that no audio visual content or critical writing on the outfit was to be published in the press without prior permission of its Publicity wing leading to a major

[12] Slavoj Zizek, 2009 (2008), *Violence*. London: Profile Books, p. 8. Zizek's account of mass violence probes the complex interaction among the three modes of subjective, objective, and symbolic violence that perpetuate the whole phenomena of violence in the global capitalist democracies of the present times.

fracas with the media. But there seems to have been some compromise that was struck for this also caused a split in the media. Consequently, what was reported in the regional media was usually adulatory, whereby the ULFA came to be seen in a 'Robin Hood'–like image, benevolent bandits for the most part working to uplift the socially disadvantaged, self-appointed watchdogs and soul keepers of the Assamese, as it were (Dutta 2008). Conscious of scrutiny and scepticism for its allegedly anti-state activities from the social bases it grew out of, the ULFA created a sort of cult and myth of this role, taking on an overtly moral mission as it clamped bans on illicit sale of country liquor, circulation of pornography, gambling, and black-marketing in every moffusil town and village of the state. ULFA's conflict with the United Reservation Movements Council of Assam (URMCA) in 1986 over this raged into a bitter media debate in what was seen by the latter as an insensitive stance towards the indigenous groups whose traditional practices and, thus, sources of income, came under threat by this sanction. In what seemed to be a parallel administration and governance at work, the outfit went about in guerrilla fashion in the early and mid eighties calling upon the rural folk to come together and repair roads, build bridges and dykes in flood hit areas across Assam with the state government standing on as silent witness. These events were publicized in messages drawn as graffiti and pasted on bulletins that got splashed overnight on the buildings of semi-rural schools, dispensaries, roadside tea-stalls, and bus-stops along highways that connected Assam from east to west. Or simply got passed down through word of mouth and sometimes, even through village tom toms. ULFA's new move drew overwhelming support from the common folk while urban Assam waited and watched from the sidelines even as the vernacular press wrote glowingly of the rebels. ULFA's treks to neighbouring Burma and Bhutan in the 1980s to train its cadres also became the stuff of lore and legends for the common man. Several diaries of former cadres describing in rich detail the camps in foreign country continue to create and extend the myths and magic of early ULFA activities, though in the present times these are often read in conjunction with the more critical reports and accounts that have poured in both from

ex-rebels and observers since its decline from the mid-nineties. The Kachin expedition for the first camps in Burma in 1984 has been richly accounted in Parag Das's novella *Sanglot Fenla*, the maiden guerrilla narrative that poured out of the ULFA camps in the 1980s.[13]

In Nagaon, Darrang, and Sonitpur districts of Central Assam the outfit patronized the youth to set up cooperatives and agro farms but simultaneously robbed banks and committed extortions on wealthy businessmen in the cities (Nath 2013). Each time such an event happened and the press reported it with official statements from the authorities, ULFA's leaders sent their own communique to the press and later via email that carried on its own conversation with the public, addressing their messages to the people of the state justifying or confessing their acts of commission or omission. This was a novel record, a dialogic encounter with the archive, expanding, dislodging and threatening the canon while daring to rewrite it.

The 10 May 1985 United Commercial Bank daylight loot in Guwahati resulted in the death of the Manager and the security gateman of the bank by shooting. On 11 May the headlines of *The Assam Tribune* from Guwahati screamed of ULFA's descent into militant activities from its earlier friendly neighbourly image. In Upper Assam, the fertilizer township of Namrup in Tinsukia district witnessed a similar robbery at its SBI city branch the next year in which a retired bank official was killed and several of the staff badly injured. In 1987 another major bank loot by a large ULFA team established that the outfit had somewhere compromised its ideals of creating a peaceful Assam. Clearly the contradictions in the ULFA narratives had scripted a new bloody history out of its own verdant dreams.

In the fractious social and political environment that prevailed in these times, certain metaphors and meanings came to be inscribed onto events and collective memories of the rebels and

[13] Parag Das, 1993. *Sanglot Fenla*, Udangshree Prakashan, Guwahati.

their roller-coaster ride through the Brahmaputra valley. Paresh Baruah, ULFA Commander in Chief's love for football evoked a new literature of the rebel hero, but it did not take long for the spectator of this theatre of blood and mire, to swiftly move through a transition from the volleys at the goalpost to the gallows. Lakhipathar near Digboi oil town in Tinsukia district gained notoriety in 1990 during the counterinsurgency Operation Bajrang's discovery of mass graves evoking for some the dark and grim Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, whose popular, educated and seemingly progressive leader educated in Europe, Pol Pot, had left a trail of terror and incredulous fear in the minds of the people when his crimes and serial executions came to light. Who were these people who had been done in? Were these criminals that the state had not booked or penalized or were these people who had been secret ULFA informers hired by the intelligence? Were they local goons and profiteers or simply innocent men caught in the web of insurgency and life's ordinary struggles for survival? *Rumours proliferated alongside news* and smaller towns throughout Assam witnessed through the late 1980s and 1990s the birth of "little magazines" that wrote and published candidly about people's responses to ULFA carrying on a conversation from Sadiya in the east to the western point in Dhubri on the rebellion in the state. Prominent journalists and newspapers reported with enthusiasm about this phenomenon which gripped the lives of the people of the state. As M.S. Prabhakara notes, ULFA was more than anything else "a state of mind in Assam".[14] Prabhakara's bold and unsparing critiques of both the insurgency and the government's flawed handling of it constitutes a rich account of what prevailed in those decades. His

[14] "Rebels Acquiring legitimacy". *The Hindu,* Madras, March 9, 1990. Prabhakara's is a significant voice in the ULFA discourse in the state. As a journalist who lived and worked in Assam for more than three decades, he has engaged with serious political issues that the northeast of India grappled with, providing critical commentaries in *The Hindu* and *Frontline* magazine many of which have found their way into a book. See, M.S. Prabhakara, 2012. *Looking Back into the Future; Identity and Insurgency in Northeast India,* New Delhi: Routledge, See also, "Dilemma of Identity", *The Hindu*, Madras, August 24, 1990.

views on what sovereignty meant to ULFA and the larger northeastern subject of scheduling the region and its tribes vis-a-vis the question of land and territorial ownership have been a reference point for both scholars and interested lay readers, as much as for the rebel leaders many of whom Prabhakara had met while the insurgency raged on in the late eighties and nineties. In this flagrant air of revolution and resistance declared by ULFA, the covert and often complicit actions by the state administration and most notably by a section of the regional and vernacular press went a long way in securing for the outfit an unhindered progress into a people's movement, and something that assumed the proportion of self governance while the actual government in place often stayed silent. Was this mere complicity, or was it the myths and rumours about ULFA's activities of justice and moral approbation of the Assamese that brought legitimacy and social sanction to the community that watched on? Regional dailies, most notably, the *Dainik Asom* and *Ajir Asom*, published from Guwahati, were openly biased in favour of the outfit's attempts to run the state by resorting to popular gestures of mobilizing unity and developmental work across the districts from lower to upper Assam.

And while the wave of consent rose high, *Natun Padatik* and *Deuka* carried severe critiques of the insurgency and in one of the issues of the former a serious intellectual journal, ULFA's "pseudo guerrilla" mode was severely denigrated. Left, progressive, or liberal intellectual, they all participated in the phenomenon called ULFA, mostly rejecting its plea for sovereignty and at other times subtly standing up for some of their demands for greater attention and support from the Indian state. Myron Weiner's observation that "…nativism among other activities acts as a trigger for secessionist revolts…a claim by a group that by virtue of its indigenous character rooted in historical claims has rights on its land, employment, political power and cultural hegemony greater than those who are not indigenous…" rings a bell and the complex epistemes of sovereign power and autonomy also shore up the debate over ULFA's legitimacy in the state (319). One of the most important moments determining ULFA's later destiny turned out to be the imposition of President's

Rule in 1990 and also the counterinsurgency operations of Bajrang and Rhino that came in its wake. A wave of paranoia, uncertainty, and deep despair attended those years as state and non-state forces came to a head in combat and confrontation leaving behind a trail of destruction.

There was a fair amount of reflection and writing in the counterinsurgency wave of the turbulent 90s amidst waves of fresh violence in the aftermath of the much hyped surrenders ULFA cadres under the patronage of the then Chief minister, Hiteswar Saikia. This was a critical faultline in ULFA's history. Many of these writings figured in newspapers and local magazines, among them prominently Sunil Nath, alias Siddhartha Phukan, ULFA's Chief of Publicity and the outfit's spokesman whose regular interviews to the media created a new narrative of the problems of guerrilla activity and the downside of waging war against the state. Nath found himself in a central position again when his statements in press as a beneficiary of the government's schemes to coopt ex-combatants at staggering public costs (Nearly 3500 ULFA rebels were rehabilitated by the state at more than 2 lakh per head expenses between 1992 and 1997) brought in fresh controversy about the "Frankensteinian monster" that the counterinsurgency tactics of the state had unleashed. Later, Nath went on to don the role of editor of a local Assamese daily, *Axomiya Khobor*, in which his confessions as an ex-rebel and his critical stance against the insurgent group invited severe flak and created a visible divide between ULFA sympathizers and those that were on the side of the renegades.

The regional press (Assamese newspapers and magazines) picked up the cues and soon Assam was witness to a major civil society movement by the vernacular media against the excesses of the outfit on the one hand and on the other, the corrupt practices of a new mafia, the surrendered ULFA or SULFA as they were commonly known. (*Faultlines* 2001)[15]. Later in 2002, in a candid

[15] Ajay Sahni and Bibhu Prasad Routray, 2001. "SULFA: Terror by Another Name". *Faultlines*. Vol 9. See also Sunil Nath, 2002. "Secessionist Insurgency and the Freedom of Minds" *Faultlines.* Vol 13.

and more rational account in the security journal *Faultlines*, Sunil Nath wrote on what he called "seccessionist insurgency" and the "freedom of minds" in which he argued more for "the state of mind" that ULFA was to the Assamese than the terrorists they had come to be popularly seen as, for instance in the metropolitan media. (Vol 13). He also argued, as a former ULFA rebel, that the outfit's armed activities were nowhere as significant as the "all pervasive effect"it had been able to garner on Assamese society (27). Clearly, then, the role of the media and that of allied literature on the conflict in the state corroborated the mood of anger and rebellion and collaborated with the conscious project for conflict resolution and the cessation of violence.

In another momentous event in the ULFA timeline, Parag Das, journalist and firebrand critic of the state, and votary and confidante of ULFA who edited the bold weekly called *Budhbar* 1990–1994 (literally Wednesday) raised serious objections at the manner in which these surrenders were conducted. In a simple but gripping narrative, *Sanglot Fenla* (1993) Das had made popular ULFA's trek to neighbouring Myanmar to train under the tutelage of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), where the outfit in 1984 had first set up its training camps. The Kachin province of Myanmar has had a long history of mentoring rebels from Northeast India in its territory and like the NSCN (IM) and (K), and still earlier the MNF and UNLF in the mid 1960s, ULFA too found support in these foreign shores. (Lintner: 2012). In a satirical first page story titled *Another Siddhartha Phukan Speaks* Das challenged the surrendered leader's views on Indian democracy and questioned how the former insurgent who protested against the Indian state could seek safety and refuge in its dubious structures? (*Budhbar,* 22 Jan 1992). Held under the NSA for his anti-state opinions, Parag Das was arrested in 1992 and later again in 1993 under the TADA. Parag Das' detention by an aggressive state has typically been viewed as a repressive measure of state control that handicaps the individual rights of the citizen, and more, the freedom of the press. This event stirred a hornet's nest and almost every newspaper in Assam protested the arrests leading to a massive offensive by journalists, writers,

and intellectuals. The triad of Niloy Das/Ajit Bhuyan/Parag Das—all human rights activists and founder members of the Manav Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS), a local cognate human rights' watch group—found themselves at the center of a popular campaign against what was perceived as a vicious brand of counter insurgency move by the state especially with respect to the extra judicial killings and disappearances, and later the other dark phenomenon the secret killings in Assam between 1992–1996. (*Budhbar* 1 April 1992). Professor Hiren Gohain, eminent academic and social scientist, himself a strident critic of the insurgency and also a keen observer of ULFA's chequered role in political resistance to the government in these crucial times wrote scathingly of the exploitative apparatus of the state. His commentaries on the role of the intellectual in the troubled history of Assam and the northeast is well known, also for its penetrating account of the region's deep unrest and disjunction from the Indian nation. His articles in EPW and a series of books on Assam's social and historical bearings from the 1980s to the present, many of them in Assamese, provide a serious archive of contemporary political thought and critiques on the region. His contribution on the 'extremist' example of northeast India captures adequately the challenges and contradictions that face the region and the Indian state with respect to a people's disenchantment.[16]

Yet, the writer's peril and the romance of revolution were twin forces that Parag Das'brief but eventful life in the time of conflict exemplifies in Assam's militant history. His *Swadhinatar Prastab* (A Proposal for Independence) proscribed by the Government of Assam as seditious writing was read as a challenge to the nation–state, a job he took seriously while persistently urging in his newspaper for the abolishment of AFSPA in the region, a cause that many other journalists, after him have taken up and continue to crusade for both in the state and in New Delhi. On May 17 1996, Parag Das was riddled by bullets from unknown assailants

[16] Hiren Gohain, 1996. "Extremist Challenge and the Indian State: Case of Assam" *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31/31 (Aug 3) pp. 2066–2068.

on one of Guwahati's main thoroughfares not far from where he lived. The intelligence claimed they were SULFA predators and the government claimed they belonged to ULFA whose ideologies Das had fallen out with. Dichotomies of such kind typically informed the insurgency narrative and rumours freely floated down the Brahmaputra with incredible speed. Stories contested each other and like rumours that travelled had several versions credible or otherwise. The popular lores and urban myths that gathered around the Parag Das murder bore the weight of political and cultural tensions and in Guwahati it was at one time considered "sensitive" to even broach the subject in public. Be that as it may, after judicial probes and court cases that stretched for more than a decade the main accused was still not convicted for what was explained as lack of "circumstantial evidence". Secret documents and the intelligence were another layer of the statist archive breaking into which was nearly impossible. Yet, in more recent times a small but succinct journalistic account of the killings of that dark period, called *Secret Killings* (Mrinal Talukdar and Kishore Deka), and a very recent novel by Aruni Kashyap (*The House with a Thousand Stories*), based on the period of those crimes, attempt to imaginatively fill that yawning gap in the ULFA discourse. A culture of secrecy, surveillance, and most overwhelmingly of fear stalked most of the public accounts of those times creating a general air of suspicion and unease and stories often got suppressed or silenced. The many testimonies that ordinary civilians provided of the daylight murder of Parag Das, later, predictably, became fuzzy with witnesses turning hostile and did not help the judiciary resolve the case or concretely pin down the accused. The human rights organization MASS launched statewide protests and came out with pamphlets and later reports on SULFA excesses and the militarized violence in Assam. Parag Das had been a founder member of this human rights watch group, some members of which later joined the civil society initiative to foster peace, repeal the dark laws, and end ULFA's hostilities with the Center. Yet nineteen years on after his killing, the draconian law persists.

Clearly then, in Assam, it has been difficult to separate the rebels from the larger aspirations of a people and civil society,

who share responsibilities towards citizens in a curiously affiliated, if informal manner. As Gohain says therefore, despite the clear split that the conscious Assamese has from the ideologies of a later day ULFA in decline, the ordinary man on the street is ambivalent about serious reprisals against them and would not take a strident position even today when their public credibility has plummeted heavily.[17] His contention that a "groundswell of popular rage spearheaded by a largely independent media and supported by democratic public intellectuals" led to a skewed approach to sub-nationalist agitation in the state is pertinent especially in the light of the events that dot ULFA's trajectory of rise and fall. As he also points out, the mainstream media tended to portray ULFA's Assam as a "scene of uninterrupted mayhem, thuggery and violence" while obscuring more vital historical contexts that actually culminated in the armed rebellion and demand for independence and "sovereignty". Gohain, thus, takes into account the validity of what he calls "the genuine national aspirations of the Assamese people" even as he denigrates the outfit's grievous errors and reckless moves aided by "terrible misjudgments" on the part of the rebel leadership. Like some of the other conscious citizens, Gohain has been part of a major and consistent endeavour to protest ULFA's arrogance and "military adventurism" flavoured by what he termed, a "vague leftist ideology". ULFA's worst crime—apart from extortions, random bomb blasts, the killings of kidnapped bureaucrats and corporates, has admittedly been the murder of Sanjay Ghose, an NGO working in the riverine island of Majuli in Upper Assam, in July 1997, allegedly masterminded by the outfit. While the pro-talks leaders of the outfit extended an unconditional apology for what was called a "mistake" more than a decade later, Ghose's violent death has remained a blot in the ULFA timeline, triggering deep revulsions both in Assam and outside.[18] However Gohain's ability

[17] Hiren Gohain, "Chronicles of Violence and Terror: The Rise and Decline of United Liberation Front of Asom" *EPW* Vol 42, #12 (March 24, 2007) p. 1012. See also, "A Background Note to a New Civil Society Initiative for Resumption of Talks Between the Centre and the ULFA" May 5, 2010. http://sanhati.com/articles/2345/#sthash.CkRdypZU.dpuf . Accessed 10 July 2015.

[18] "Sanjay Ghose Killing a Mistake", *The Telegraph*, February 6, 2011.

to isolate other critical issues—that were under threat of being sidelined in this protracted combat between non-state actors and the government—had a significant role to play in his initiative at forging an alliance of civil society groups in Assam that sought to intervene in bringing the rebels to the path of peace.[19]

In their paeans to ULFA rebels and their sympathizers and supporters, the names of Uddipta Hazarika, the first publicity chief of the organization and Kabi Ranjan Saikia are hallowed. Kabi Ranjan Saikia (alias Swadhinata Phukan) an ULFA martyr is celebrated as the outfit's first muse and some of ULFA's publicity pamphlets carry his verses on revolution and resistance as the outfit's signature slogans. Mithinga Daimary, alias, Dipak Das (who writes poetry under his nom de guerre, Megan Kachary)—a former cadre of the ULFA and its publicity chief after Sunil Nath until his arrest in 2003 following the Bhutanese crackdown on the militants camps in the Indo-Bhutan borders—admitted in an interview that he was at heart not a poet–rebel but a rebel poet. With three collections of poetry to his credit, including the widely read *Guns and Melodies* (in translation) released at the 2006 Frankfurt Book Fair, Kachary came to represent the archetypal artist caught in the state's turmoil. The turn of the twenty-first century marked another faultline for ULFA as it prepared for ceasefire and laying down of arms in its strategy to broker peace with the Indian state.

Many new writings once again poured out, this time also from former combatants giving rise to a new genre, the guerrilla novel that inspired Roktim Sarma's *Barangan Gaan* (2006). Anurag Mahanta, who wrote *Owlingor Jui* (2007), a former ULFA commandant trained in Bangladesh and later at Myanmar, is today an emerging novelist who hopes to turn the pen rather than the

[19] *The Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibartan* (SJA), an umbrella platform for civil society under the stewardship of Hiren Gohain, brought together more than a hundred organizations and the rebels to hold a joint convention in 2010 in Guwahati and help formulate a 'Charter of Demands' from ULFA to be placed at the talks with the Government of India for negotiation of peace between the warring sides.

gun. The more confessional Samudra Gogoi's *Ejon Prakton ULFAr Swikarukti* (2008) or the very recent and deeply negative account, *Norokor Beli* (2014) by Nilim Akash Kashyap have swamped the mind of the young reader in what are unarguably great moments of transition and a rethink of the years of rebellion. In the last four years several memoirs of former rebels have also hit the market. I have chosen not to include here ULFA's current post-ceasefire dispensation and its narratives, of which there are many, and some that continue to be written, for two reasons. One, we are still very close to this period to comment objectively on the writings that issue out of this rather nebulous moment in the history of northeastern rebellions and this requires separate attention and a much longer tract. Two, there is also in recent times, a certain weariness about the discourse and reflections on insurgency in the region, attended by an indifference that sociologists often attribute to "conflict fatigue" (Mahanta 2013). While this itself is a subject for wide debate, it is not untrue that a new more vibrant genre of writing that challenges the grim and dark decades in Assam's recent insurgent past and calls for a refashioning of the history of that era, has certainly emerged.

It is equally important to dwell on the categories that these writings have come from. While many have witnessed this period of rebellion and revolt in Assam and been part of a large transformation, social and psychological, the creative writer has chosen to be more outspoken and prolifically employed the theme of insurgency as trope for both fictional and lyrical narratives. Even at a cursory glance, the writing of the recent years is phenomenally affected by the present militant history of the region. More pointedly, a large section of this archive can be sourced from former rebels who have often written their memoirs, diaries, or confessions after disbanding from the outfit, whether in ceasefire mode or as surrendered cadres. Yet, the absence of the woman rebel in this archive, primarily as writer is pertinent if not wholly surprising. Her experience of insurgency is integral to the manner in which life in the camps and outside lent a cohesive factor amongst cadres, and her testimonies remain critical to understanding the dynamic of rebellion through the

decades of ULFA's existence as a guerrilla outfit.[20] But she is vocal and her testimonies provide a rich insider's look into both the camps and her life beyond the camps back in the community. Will the women's experiences of insurgency be recovered? And why does the archive remain silent on rebel heroines? Or are there really no heroines to celebrate? These questions prompt and signal toward the gap in narratives on and from female cadres. In the last year Kaberi Kochari Rajkonwar, senior cadre and wife of the chairman of ULFA (pro-talks) Arabinda Rajkhowa has come out with a book that was received with mixed reactions both from insiders and from the ordinary and informed reader.[21] The title, roughly translated as "Despite wishes and restraints, a few thoughts "confessional as it is, signals toward the hesitant diarist, someone half-willing and only half-ready to speak. As combat wives, the likes of Kaberi Kochari have been typically rendered ineffectual and mostly viewed ambivalently. Yet, Rajkonwar not only symbolizes the tenuous and hidden spaces which women inhabit within the outfit but also sharply points toward an empowerment and agency that the rebellion, despite its failed mission, necessarily offered them. Clearly, the work breaks the invisibility of the former woman rebel and brings her centerstage and right into the thick of the discourse that continues to evolve and emerge. Other woman rebels who have not ventured to write do have their own strong views of the organization: their oral histories and ethnographies are rich sources of the life and times of the rebels and narrate many anecdotes and accounts of the perils and temptations of life on the edge. They are also often, strident critiques of the patriarchy prevailing at the heart of the organization: something that is apparent when one looks at the

[20] Rakhee Kalita Moral, "The Woman Rebel and the State: Making War, Making Peace in Assam". *EPW*. Vol 49, Nos. 43 & 44, 1 November, 2014.
[21] See *Ischa Anischa Sotteo Kisu Kotha,* 2013, Ali Baat, Guwahati. Rajkonwar's book is at once a broad and close look at the workings of ULFA, though it tends to offer an insider's glimpse of the core group and its turbulent rise and fall while focussing on the central leadership, which includes her husband, Arabinda Rajkhowa himself. Richly descriptive it offers a detailed account of the early formative days of the rebellion and is also, unwittingly, an aside on the gendered hierarchies within the outfit.

profiles of the stakeholders and significant members who constitute the peace negotiating groups at this current moment. Contradictions typically abound in the story of ULFA, and it is vital to get under the complex layers of rhetoric and rumour to make sense of the true spirit of the rebellion that aspired to transform Assam, as an Assamese journalist has recently revealed in his first-hand accounts of the organization and its hardline commander, Paresh Baruah who is still at large.[22] Betrayals and bombast surround the lores and legends that armed rebellions teem in and ULFA has been no different. Its women, however as most observers and critics note, have been generally undermined , both in terms of their contribution to the outfit and their lives after conflict that often speak more loudly than most official communiques or publicity pamphlets of the organization do.[23] The rebel discourse thus becomes a fascinating site for ellipses and erasures which is contested by the records that pour in from other agents, observers, and witnesses.

Did the resistance movement and insurgency with its unfettered, disaggregated body of information and narratives constitute a break or rupture in the normative archive or in a more postmodern sense actually reinvent the archive ethnographically and historically? Which is to say, would a history of the Assamese be incomplete without this slice of the archive, small and amorphous though it is? And are these violent epiphanies, moments of apocalypse in a community, tragic tales and suppressed stories, regimes of silence even, likely to be erased

[22] Rajeev Bhattacharyya, 2014, *Rendezvous with Rebels*, New Delhi: Harper Collins. This is a bold if nearly subversive narrative of ULFA's resistance to the state with a rare close-up encounter by the author of the commander in chief Paresh Baruah in the Indo-Myanmar rebel camps. Interestingly, Bhattacharyya's book is a debut in the thirty-year history of ULFA, which looks at an enemy of the state for the first time as an ordinary man, humane and struggling, sans his militant mask and in full disclosure of the outfit's inner strengths and threats.

[23] Rakhee Kalita Moral, 2013. "Living and Partly Living: The Politics of Violence and the Women of ULFA", NMML *Occasional Paper,* History and Society Series, S. No. 31, New Delhi .

over a point in time? Would the archive thus be cast in a metaphor of memory or forgetting?

If ULFA failed in its mission and was a lost cause, would the archive however remain testimony to the outfit's ability to raise the vital need for Assam's serious engagement with the nation–state and the importance of regionalism and states of a new ethnic order in postcolonial India? To turn the debate full circle and end at the beginning, the emergence of this alternative history of a post national Assam, or India's northeast suggests a continuum which may be in large part the overarching destiny that geography scripts. Peripheral states or frontier societies engender anxieties and dissent: much of Assam's social and political thought in the contemporary times issue out of the fault lines and fractures that its recent sub-nationalist history and rebel experience have had to negotiate.[24] As Sanjib Baruah argues, the ULFA like most other insurgencies hasn't been able to arrive at a desired end of its battles with the state with regard to ideology, its identity politics, or its revolutionary ideals. Baruah's persistent evaluation of the social and political climate of northeast India and more specifically of insurgent and counterinsurgent politics in Assam adds a critical skein to the discourse that is available of those times: his accounts of the rise and fall of the rebellion also simultaneously erects a critical engagement with policies on the northeast made by the government of India, policies that have often failed as much as they have been flawed. Further, his works have fuelled a growing body of responses to the crises that have afflicted the region and much of the writings and debates on it. In the cultural representations too that have poured out, both in the oral and visual narratives of the post-insurgency northeast, the reigning tropes of isolation, oppression, backwardness and most of all the 'democracy deficit' Baruah speaks of, are not of this moment alone but hark back to an older history that criss

[24] Sanjib Baruah, *Postfrontier Blues*, p 17. Baruah enumerates, as key factor, among other concerns, "a two way deficit of understanding with the rest of the country which compounds the others" in the growing distrust and disenchantment the region is confronted by .

crosses with the present in order to find the shaping spirit of the community.[25] Udayon Misra, academic and political commentator, endorses this historical legacy that Assam inherited in the transactions between a colonial authority and a newly annexed territory, in the nineteenth century.[26] Part of ULFA's refrain about a sovereign state and its plea for self determination stemmed from the claim that Assam was never part of the Indian territory under the British. Misra's exegesis of the margins challenging the nation–state in his seminal work offers a clear history of northeast India's tenuous bonds with India while at the same time positing the contradictions in the rhetoric of ULFA's stake for sovereignty. The prolific body of literature that the Assam Movement (against influx of immigrants from Bangladesh) had elicited in the 1980s, Misra contends, also triggered interesting debates figuring in the national media, including serious journals like the EPW on sub-nationalism and the Assamese mindset with regard to India's policies towards development of the region.[27] These logically carried over to the arguments that the ULFA rebels advanced in their own demand for autonomy and "independence".

Among most other ethnicities in India's northeast, the Assamese have been late in expressing separatist tendencies. The forces of genealogy and its linguistic and cultural history have certainly prevented the community from disengaging entirely from the body politic of Indian nationhood. While the discourse of the 1980s and 1990s leaned towards a secessionist ideal fuelled by ULFA's spirited campaign and propaganda of unbelonging and separateness from the Indian state, other factors and spontaneous responses to the violent politics of militancy that ensued in the state in the period following the mid 1990s indicate a strong and

[25] See also Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India,* 2007, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. The book gives a lucid account of the early stages of ULFA as it relooks at the relationship between the claims of democracy and the prevalence of widespread conflict in northeast India.

[26] Udayon Misra, 2013 (2000), *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation–state from Assam and Nagaland*, Shimla: IIAS, p. 67.

[27] Ibid., p. 164.

resurgent sliding back to the fold.[28] It may not be unfair to conclude, from the above that the discourse prompted by ULFA opened up a whole gamut of opinions and expressions that firmly laid down a culture of dissent throwing open new debates on India's development paradigms for its northeast. In it, it is also possible to recognize a regional aspiration that was nowhere before articulated so boldly bringing to Indian intellectual and social maps a "northeastern" line of grievance. Rebel narratives of the 1980s and 1990s in Assam are shrill and loud about the urgent need to secede. Yet there are more recent counter responses, a lot of which is mediated by witnesses, both from home and abroad, that seriously debate alternative survival modes in conflict ridden postcolonial worlds. As a young Assamese critic writing from an American university argues, these cultural productions are increasingly significant to the emerging discourse and to the transformations they engender among subjects who experience various states of dispossession: "…ethically, it helps the narrator acknowledge the demands of dispossessed others; politically, he recognizes alternative modalities of being and existing beyond sovereign governmentality and autonomous subjectivity…".[29] Thus, in fictional works like *Felanee*, for example, the lens moves away from the centrality of the violence itself towards agents of survival, which is, in this case, a group of working-class women who ingenuously devise strategies for renewed life and continuity amidst the killing fields of Assam, hounded by ethnic violence and fear. The turn in the narrative is

[28] Rakhee Kalita Moral, "Of Ends and Beginnings: War, Peace and the Interregnum", in special issue, 'Assam: The Unstable Peace', *Seminar* # 640, December, New Delhi: 2012.

[29] Amit Rahul Baishya, "The Act of Watching with One's Own Eyes: 'Strange Recognitions' in An Outline of the Republic ". *Interventions* Vol 17, Issue 4: 2015. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.937732, published online (10 July 2014). Baishya belongs to a new pool of scholar-critics who participate transnationally in an animated debate on what constitutes the narratives of the contemporary times, a moment in which the most of the northeast, including Assam is caught, arguably, in a 'state of exception'. See also, Arupa Patangia Kalita. 2011 [2003]. *Felanee* (trans Deepika Phukan), New Delhi: Zubaan.

in evidence, whether one looks at writings from Assam or elsewhere in the troubled terrains of India's northeastern borderlands. These are conversations that happen in the aftermath of conflict in the fragile northeastern societies, where, surprisingly, the ability to endure violence often prevails over the precarity of life itself. The archive is a polyglot of sounds, signs and expressions that definitively mark moments of disjunction even as they admit the possibility of transition and the renewal of life. These writings, straddling death and desire, as it were, both from within the insurgency and from its witnesses that issue out of later stages in the rebellions and dissent against the state, clearly point to other long-term concerns and also, understandably more sober, posthumous reflections on 'revolution' and its discontents.

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