Creating Robin Hoods

The Insurgency of the ULFA in its Early Period,
Its Parallel Administration and
The Role of Assamese Vernacular Press
(1985-1990)

Uddipan Dutta
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Preface

The Scholar of Peace Fellowships awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects are designed to encourage original and innovative work by academics, policy makers, defense, and foreign policy practitioners, NGO workers and others. The series WISCOMP Perspectives in conjunction with WISCOMP Discussion Papers brings the work of some of these scholars to a wider readership.

The fellowships awarded for media projects are designed to support young and mid-career journalists seeking to focus on in-depth stories. The work resulting from these projects is generally published as compilation of articles. Occasionally, WISCOMP has supported media analyses by journalists seeking to identify messages and examine how they are framed in particular contexts. The current study belongs to this latter category.

The author takes a piece from the Assamese socio-political history to trace the trajectory of sub nationalism in the state and the role of symbols in this process. Using the metaphor of Robinhood – a symbol of resistance and a champion of natural justice, the author attempts to answer two central questions. Whether the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) cadres were portrayed in the vernacular print media as Robinhoods? What was the role of media in the creation and/or perpetuation of this image? It specifically locates how the ideas of martyrdom, enemy and welfare as propagated by the ULFA were reported in the press stories.

Primarily drawing on reportage and editorials in two dailies – Dainik Asom and Ajir Asom and articles in two monthly magazines – Prantik and Sutradhar, this study attempts to collate information on the activities undertaken by the ULFA during the period under study and present various perspectives on the organization. The findings indicate some crucial silences of the press on the activities of the organization and the underlying causes of this phenomenon. It offers two competing explanations – one, that tacit support for the ends of the movement led the press to selectively report events and two, an undercurrent of fear in both the press and amongst the people lead them to minimize reporting. The author argues that in the early years of the movement the press reflected a certain amount of sympathy towards the
organization. However, the image of the cadres was not entirely benevolent. There were several reports and articles in the press that expressed misgivings about the goals of the organization and were critical of the means used by ULFA to achieve those ends.

The study therefore concludes that while there was a general perception in the early years that ULFA cadres were Robinhood-like, reflections of this image in the media were ambiguous. The author attributes this ambiguity to the fact that the welfare activities of the organization did not get sufficient coverage in the press reports. Subsequent interviews with community leaders and commoners in parts of the state where the ULFA had undertaken public welfare projects during that period seemed to suggest that since the press was forced to avoid overtly critical reportage on the organization, through a deliberate blocking of the organization’s welfare activities and emphasis on its moral policing activities, the press may have actually hurt the Robinhood-like image of the organization and thereby subverted the dictates of the ULFA.

Since 2007 Assam has witnessed the reemergence of anti-outsider sentiments and consequently several incidents of violence and displacement have occurred. In such a context this research raises some pertinent questions. At one level it questions the role of press in reporting incidents of political violence and at another more fundamental level it questions the ethicality of the means used by socio political groups to voice their discontent against the establishment. The support offered by the people to organizations that claim to speak for the rights of ‘original inhabitants’ is also put under the scanner. Although the scope of this study does not extend to causal analysis of the spread of ULFA ideology or the violence it generated, it raises some important concerns about the means adopted by organizations claiming to fight for the rights of the people and the multitude of emotions such movements evoke. It is an important piece of research for anyone attempting to understand the current developments in Assam and more broadly, the vocabulary and symbols used to garner support for political violence.
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Uddipan Dutta
I
Introduction

1.1. Overview

Although there are many insurgent organizations operating in Assam, representing different communities of the region, this study is confined to the activities of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and as data it uses only the Assamese Vernacular Print Media and the oral narratives of the people directly or indirectly affected by its activities. The term “early period” also spells ambiguity. Although the ULFA was established on 7th April 1979, its activities were overshadowed by the Assam movement led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU). The historic Assam movement (1979-1985) came to an end on 15th August 1985, after the agreement between the Central Government and the AASU leadership. The movement leadership formed a political party called Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and came to power in the subsequent elections. The ULFA emerged as an alternative force, with a distinct political ideology only after AGP had assumed power. The disillusionment of the people with the AGP ministry and the subsequent vacuum provided a political space to the ideology of the ULFA. Although, it is a matter of debate, the study assumes that the ULFA emerged as a distinct organization only after 1985 and the period between 1979 and 1985 should be termed as the ‘formative period under the blanket of the Assam movement’. So, in this work, the early period covers the phase between the signing of the Assam Accord on 15th August 1985 by the AASU leadership and the declaration of the President’s rule and the concurrent launching of the army operations on November 28, 1990. For the sake of clarity of understanding, liberty would be taken with the time frame in terms of months.

An important aspect of the early period of insurgency in Assam, particularly between 1985 and 1990 was the mystery shrouded around the activities of the ULFA and the making of the legends and the myths about the activities of its cadres. The people talked in hushed voice about the sangathan’s activities in the jungles, the boys disappearing from home and some returning trained in guerilla warfare. By 1988, the cadres started roaming freely with sophisticated arms and ammunitions dictating the people and the civil administration what to
do. To garner public support, the ULFA adopted the strategy of fighting the social evils by threatening the country liquor sellers, punishing publicly the people whom they thought had engaged in drinking, gambling or eve-teasing. At the same time they extorted huge sums of money from the corrupt officials and the businessmen ostensibly as a punishment but in reality to enlarge its coffers. In many places the ULFA even established courts to give punishment to the people accused of crimes. The punishments meted out by such courts used to be too severe and the people had started looking at the ULFA with awe and fear. Many welfare measures and developmental projects were also undertaken by the ULFA such as building of embankments to prevent soil erosion during the flood, building roads, community farming, starting up of agricultural farms etc. Although puerile in their approach, a large number of the people participated in these public welfare activities either out of fear or out of genuine hope for a change. A ‘Robin Hood’ like image was thus created around the ULFA cadres and at the same time the symbol of Swadhin Asom (independent Assam) penetrated into popular consciousness. This work is an effort to study systematically the different phases of the early period of the activities of the ULFA and to locate the ‘romantic larger than life image’ of the organization and its cadres during this period. For this purpose, qualitative data was collected from two sources – the vernacular press and the people’s narratives from a particular locale where the ULFA had taken up a ‘developmental’ project. The role of the press, particularly the Assamese vernacular press is very important in this context as it functions both as the chronicler of events as well as the manufacturer of opinions. The different activities of the ULFA are reconstructed through the reading of the texts of Assamese newspapers and magazines. The diverse positions of the news-houses on ULFA and its activities during this period are assessed through the news they presented, the feature articles they published and the debates they generated. An attempt is also made here to reconstruct an event of ULFA induced ‘development programme’ to understand the local dynamics, in which the ULFA operated and the way people remember that process now.

1.2. ULFA: The Organization

ULFA claims that it was originally founded in the lawns of the historic Rang Ghar of Sivasagar on 7th April 1979. Although it has witnessed many ups and downs over the years, the organization has not changed
its basic objective, namely to ‘liberate’ Assam, through ‘national’ armed struggle from the clutches of the ‘illegal occupation’ of India and to establish a ‘sovereign’ ‘independent’ Assam. The claimed ideology of the ULFA is ‘scientific socialism based on nationalism’³. The organization maintains that it is a ‘revolutionary people’s group’ and not a terrorist organization and asserts that India has been exploiting Assam both economically and politically and the nature of this exploitation is colonial. According to it, Assam had never been a part of India and its present occupation of Assam is illegal and so its struggle must not be termed as secessionist⁴. It was banned by the Central Government on November 28, 1990 under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. The ban still continues and was last extended on November 27, 2006 for a period of two years⁵.

1.3. The Robin Hood Texts

Robin Hood is the famous English folk hero known for his outlawry and chivalry. But there are numerous versions of the story of Robin Hood. The stories have evolved and elicited different interpretations across generations in the hands of wandering minstrels, dramatists, chroniclers, historians, literary critics and more recently film makers.

Although references to Robin Hood occur in the B-text of Piers Plowman dated as early as 1377 and in the writings of others like Fordun, the fourteenth century Scottish historian, his pupil Bower, the Abbot of St. Colomb, Wyntoun (1420), Holished⁶ etc, according to Roger Lancelyn Green⁷, A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode, a collection of ballads, a prose rendering of several of the ballads and two plays by Anthony Munday- The Downfall of Robert Earl of Huntingdon and The Death of Robert Earl of Huntingdon, constitute nearly all we may call the original Robin Hood literature⁸. Other important Robin Hood literature includes Robert Green’s play George-a-Green the Pinner of Wakefield, Ben Johnson’s unfinished pastoral play The Sad Shepherd, Scott’s Ivanhoe, Thomas Love Peacock’s Maid Marian, Alfred Tennyson’s play The Forester, Alfred Noye’s Robin Hood and many other operas, plays and stories.

1.4 The Robin Hood Story

According to the version of Lancelyn Green⁹, Robert (Robin) was the son of William Fitzooth (who was half Saxon and half Norman) and Joanna, the daughter of a Saxon knight. As Joanna’s father did not
approve of her marriage with William, she had to run away with William to Sherwood Forest where Robin was born. The plot of the story was set in the last part of Twelfth Century during the reign of Richard I, the Lion Heart. Richard went to fight the Crusade just after his ascendancy to the throne. In his absence his wicked brother, Prince John usurped power from the hands of the Bishop of Ely, the rightful royal regent.

John was a cruel, merciless man and in order to make money he adopted the trick of accusing some wealthy man of treason and thereby bringing to his possession the man’s house and all his goods. After taking the possession, John used to give that property to one of his followers provided he paid him a huge sum of money. In order to pay John, his followers extorted it from the yeoman, poor peasants and even landless serfs, leaving them penniless. John had many followers including Barons, Knights, and Abbots.

In the story, the Sheriff of Nottingham, Guy of Gisborne and Prince John were the chief adversaries of Robert Fitzooth, the Earl of Huntingdon. Robert lived a dual life as Robin Hood for some time helping all who suffered under the cruelty of the lords, barons, bishops, abbots, and sheriffs, but soon to be discovered by Prince John and the Sheriff of Nottingham. After the discovery of his real identity, he was declared an outlaw and his property forfeited. It happened the day of his wedding with Lady Marian, the daughter of Lord Fitzwalter and the wedding ceremony could not be completed due to the sudden turning around of the events. After being declared an outlaw he made his abode in Sherwood Forest and deep in the wilds of Barnsdale with his band of outlaws, named the ‘Merry Men’ for their famed jollity, and started pursuing his work more vigorously. They poached on the King’s deer, robbed the passing barons, knights, bishops or abbots and helped the miserable serfs, the widows and the orphans or anybody who was in need of money. On one occasion, a Knight was even helped with money by Robin Hood.

Robin Hood never acknowledged the authority of usurper King John and continued his outlawry till the return of King Richard. After his return, Richard forgave Robin Hood and his earldom was returned to him. He married Marian and started living quietly at Locksley. But King Richard had to leave once again to protect his country at Normandy. Prince John assumed power in the absence of his brother. Except for twelve trusted men, most of the men of Robin’s gang had to leave to join Richard.
Five years passed quietly and in the meantime John gathered his strength in the absence his brother. Determined to take his revenge against his former arch-enemy Robin Hood, he waited patiently for the opportune moment to come. Robert (Robin Hood), on the other hand was unaware of the looming danger as he had his absolute faith in King Richard. John got the news of the death of his brother Richard, but except for the few close aides he did not divulge it to others. As he made his plans of attacking Robin, he got the news from a monk that Robin was praying at the church at Nottingham. He gathered his men who were all foreign mercenaries and along with the Sheriff went to the Church and arrested unarmed and unguarded Robin. He was then taken to Nottingham Castle and confined in a room. According to the plan a wall was to be erected in that little turret of the castle so that he would die incarcerated in his state of captivity. But with his presence of mind and with the help of Little John he escaped that room. They saved Marian from John and his foreign mercenaries and she had to take refuge in the nunnery of Kirkleys. The Prioress of that Church was a very greedy woman. Although she gave sanctuary to Marian from John’s men, she had something different in her mind. She knew that Marian was the heir to all Locksley estates and if Robin was dead, all that property would come to the nunnery. According to her plan, she told Marian that Robin Hood was dead and to save herself from the men of King John, Marian should become a nun. She had no choice but to accept the proposal.

Robin was very badly wounded when he had his escape from King John’s prison cell and got no opportunity to recover from his injury. After wandering in different places in disguise, he came to the Nunnery to meet Marian. As he was very sick at that time the Prioress took care of him, without knowing who he was and opened a vein to let blood go which was considered at that time a certain cure for all the illness. When he recovered a little, he gave his real identity and looked for Marian. The Prioress cooked up a story and told him that Marian had left Locksley long time back. She asked him to take rest and as he fell asleep, she loosened the bandage from his arm so that he bled slowly to his death. When he woke up it was too late. He understood what had happened. Then he remembered his bugle horn and blew it very weakly for the last time. Both Little John and Marian recognized the sound and came running to the room where Robin Hood was lying on the bed waiting for his last moment to come. He asked Little John for his bow and requested him to set a broad arrow in the string and then he drew
that arrow to the very head and loosed it so strongly that it flew well beyond the nunnery walls and fell in a green glade of the forest. Then Robin Hood fell back and died in the arms of Little John. Marian closed his eyes and wept over her dead husband. The next morning Little John found the arrow and as advised by Robin Hood buried him there.

1.5. The Interpretations of “Robin Hood”

As we get different versions of the story of Robin Hood, we get many more interpretations. A very dominant view is that Robin Hood story represents the resistance of the Saxons against the Norman conquerors. When William the Conqueror took England in the Eleventh Century, very brutally he imposed the language, customs and laws of the conquerors on the defeated Saxons. Most of the Saxon nobles faced the wrath of persecution at the hands of the Normans. Many of them were killed, most of them were dispossessed of their lands and many of them were made mere paupers. The dispossessed, disgruntled nobility and its struggle got represented in the lore of Robin Hood.

Another interpretation comes as a critique of inviolable, harsh forest laws which don’t protect the rights of the people living in the forest. The Norman forest laws were very cruel in which violators were dealt with ruthlessly either by blinding or putting the offenders to death. According to Harrison, William the Conqueror was described as the father of the stag in Peterborough Chronicle (1087) due to his conservationist zeal. The forest had become the abode of the Saxon noblemen who were dispossessed of their lands by the Norman invaders, the yeomen who could not pay the excessive tax levied by the new rulers or the serfs who were left with nothing even to make both ends meet. From their hiding places, they continued to resist the Normans and the oppressive state machinery whose rules were tilted for the corrupt abbots, cruel sheriffs or the greedy princes against the poor, distressed and the dispossessed. They robbed the rich passers-by, killed the king’s deer and lived a carefree life. They broke the laws with impunity which they thought were unjust and transgressed their natural rights. Thus, Robin Hood continues to fascinate the popular imagination for centuries to come as the champion of natural justice, by opposing the arbitrary and unjust forest laws.

In his commentary upon social banditry, E.J. Hobsbawm classifies ‘Robin Hood’ as a ‘noble robber’ and according to him Robin Hood is a highly idealized hero who embodies what all peasant bandits should
be. In the ‘noble robber’ classification, Hobsbawm attributes Robin Hood the following nine characteristics:

First, the noble robber Robin Hood is the victim of injustice who is wronged by the local authority and he starts his career as a victim of injustice. Second, he rights the wrongs committed. Third, he robs the rich to give to the poor. Fourth, he never kills except for self-defence or just revenge. Fifth, if he survives his outlawry, he returns back to his society as an honourable member. Sixth, he is admired, helped and supported by common people of his community. Seventh, since, the authorities do not have the support of the people of his community; he gets caught only through treachery. Ideally, no genuine member of the community should help the authority in getting the noble robber caught. Eighth, in theory, he is invisible and invulnerable. Ninth, he is not the enemy of the king or the emperor who is the fount of justice. He is only against the administration through which the fount of justice operates including sheriff, clergy and the other oppressors.

Again, the forest which exists along the human civilization gives shelter to the outlaws. Strategically the groups which oppose the laws of the state take shelter in the jungles. In the legend, the forest provides shelter to Robin Hood and his Merry men. The ULFA also drew its strength from the camps it had set up in the forests, away from the eyes of the common people and the law enforcing agencies.

1.6. The Early Activities of ULFA and the Robin Hood Image

A very important question that stands out is, “Can parallels be drawn between the early activities of the ULFA and the description of this English ballad hero and his band of followers?” To answer it, we need to understand that we can not get an exact correspondence between the activities of the ULFA in the recent period in Assam and the exploits of Robin Hood and his followers in medieval England. Here, Robin Hood is used only metaphorically as it powerfully catches some of the aspects of the early period of the insurgency in Assam. Moreover, we find that the people were using “Robin Hood Image of the ULFA” in both verbal and in written discourse. Even, the former publicity secretary of ULFA admitted a consciously built up “Robin Hood Image” of the organization at that period. It is important to discuss in brief the characteristics of ‘Robin Hood image’ that have been ascribed to the ULFA members in people’s discourse.
Speaking at a seminar organized by SAPRA India Foundation, in Guwahati on December 22, 2004 on the theme of insurgency in Assam, a former Chief Secretary of Assam, stated that in the early activities of ULFA there was an emphasis on the economic backwardness of the region and following it, the organization had undertaken many projects of collective farming. But these efforts were soon abandoned as the organization had relegated itself into an outfit for extorting money through terrorism. According to him, the ‘Robin Hood image’ that they had tried to project during the early years had thus been lost on the way.\textsuperscript{12}

K. Hrishikeshan, an Assam cadre officer of Indian Police Service who retired as the Director General of Police, writes of ULFA attaining a ‘Robin Hood like image’ by targeting the corrupt officials of the state. According to him the government has failed in devising a proper anti-corruption agency. The extant anti corruption agencies are like toothless tigers, according to him because they cannot undertake any investigation without first obtaining prior clearance from the Government. Due to this legal provision the influential and the politically well connected go scot-free since they are protected by their godfathers in the administration and in politics. So, by targeting such elements ULFA accumulated a huge sum of money along with attaining a ‘Robin Hood like image’, according to Hrishikeshan\textsuperscript{13}.

Again referring to the role of Indira Goswami’s writings on the plight of the working class and her efforts for bringing peace to the region, Rashmi Gogoi a college teacher says, “Such writings are bound to strike a chord with the ULFA who had earlier endeared themselves to the rural masses with their ‘Robin Hood image’. It is not surprising that the militants have reposed their faith in her.”\textsuperscript{14}

Sunil Nath, the former Publicity Secretary of ULFA accepted that ‘Robin Hood’ image was a carefully cultivated image built by ULFA in the initial phase.\textsuperscript{15} But due to indiscriminate recruitment of the cadres this image got tarnished. On asking why this image could not be kept in the later phases, very wittingly he remarked, “You can have only one Robin Hood. You can’t have thousands of them.”

It is important to observe that people cited above are from different walks of life representing diverse personal opinions about ULFA, yet all talk of a “Robin Hood image of the organization” in its early heydays. While emphasis on economic backwardness and collective farming
was the referring point of the former Chief Secretary, collecting money from the corrupt officials taking advantage of the failure of the state’s vigilance on corruption was the referring point of the former top cop K. Hrishikeshan. Again, ULFA’s rural endearing is Rashmi Gogoi’s point of reference in mentioning a Robin Hood image of ULFA. Sunil Nath on the other hand talks about a carefully crafted strategy of the organization to penetrate masses when asked about the ‘Robin Hood image’ created by the organization. Not only these personalities, but also people from different walks of life who lived in Assam in the late eighties and early nineties usually refer to a ‘Robin Hood like image’ of ULFA in their casual conversations and public discourse.

But not everyone agrees that ULFA had a benevolent Robin Hood image in the early period of its activities. A leading thinker of Assam who had penned path breaking creative literature on the theme of insurgency in Assam, has a strong reservation against using this term. In his opinion Robin Hood image is associated with the outlaw who musters people’s love and affection by virtue of his chivalry; but ULFA got its work done only through coercion and under duress. The behavior of the cadres towards the common people at that time was highly autocratic. The ‘people’s courts’ that they established were very cruel and the judgments taken were highly arbitrary. In many places very brutal punishments were given for petty crimes. (At the same time, many of the petty criminals as well as lumpen elements were inducted in to the organization.)

A senior journalist who has closely looked at the activities of ULFA believes that the use of Robin Hood is inappropriate as the ULFA is a revolutionary organization which is committed to an ideology to set Assam free from the fetters of Indian state. Whatever reform work ULFA did was just a part of the strategy at the local level. These activities do not necessarily reflect ULFA’s struggle against the ‘colonial rule’.

As the study was conceived, it was felt that the kinds of work that the ULFA undertook during 1985-1990, was qualitatively different from its later activities. Kangaroo-courts were established to punish the local criminals and wayward youngsters, country liquor was banned and public works like building embankments, roads etc were undertaken by the organization. Importantly, these activities had nothing to do with the organization’s avowed motto of waging a struggle against the ‘Indian colonialism’. The metaphor of “Robin Hood” was invoked to catch a particular mood of the period when the organization virtually
ran a parallel administration. During the course of the study, the media representation of the activities of the ULFA was also systematically studied and documented to verify this conceived image.

1.7. The Parallel Administration of the ULFA

Almost every commentator on the insurgency in Assam made the observation that ULFA ran a parallel administration during the period 1988 to 1990 and as discussed above, the parallel administration or rather ULFA’s ‘taking over’ of the rule forms the core of the proposed “Robin Hood image” of the organization. One should also bear in mind the fact that although the ULFA had declared its involvement in many acts of violence through press releases, the organization was not a banned outfit till November 27, 1990 and mere association with the activities was not unlawful.

1.8. The Media and the Mindset

As a major shared source of information and images, the media serves the citizen with numerous personal needs, the most important of which is to link him or her to the larger society and to foster a sense of oneness and solidarity. It helps create a common culture and system of values, traditions and ways of looking at the world and in some particular cases to the violent assertion of ethnic insurgency by supplying information (or myth or disinformation) about the past and the present. An important issue that surrounds this all encompassing influence of media is that it is controlled by few. These few have the power to hold a very large section of the population incommunicado. At the political level, the media has an important responsibility in the success of a democracy. Historically, an important characteristic of the movements towards democracy has been the creation of a Public Sphere, meaning the formation of a place or forum where issues of importance for a political community can be discussed and debated, and where such information that is essential to citizen participation in a community life, is presented. However, media is not the only space available as public sphere. Libraries, schools, places of worship, clubs, trade unions etc are some of the examples of public sphere institutions where people communicate and share their problems and interests. The concept is important because the success of a democratic society depends on an informed populace making political choices and due to this significant role it is put at par with the executive, the legislative and the judicial branches of government.
The mass media also transmits symbols and creates stereotypes in mass consciousness, often leading the public opinion in matters related to society and politics. In this symbolic exchange three questions stand out as being pertinent – about the politics it serves, about the self-interest of the press, and about its interaction with the public. This symbolic exchange becomes all the more complex since independent press, unlike a mouthpiece of any organization (government or political), lays its claim to be incorporated in public sphere and thus assumes a supposed neutrality, which enables it to act subtly to catch public imagination. Further, as being driven by market forces, the commercial media, in its choice of a certain cause or concept to champion, has to consider its appeal to different interest groups in the public sphere and has to create a space that allows for convergence of different interests.

1.9. The Research Question

The central research question is whether the image of ULFA in its early period of activities can be seen in terms of an image of a mysterious romantic super hero created by the imagination of the common people. The other important aspect of the study is to look at how the news of the activities of ULFA was reported in the Vernacular Press and can a relationship be established between the reportage and the ‘image’ created. But what stands out as being the most important query is to see whether there was at all a coherent image of the organization in the minds of the people.

1.10. The Methodology

The aim of the study required concentrating on two aspects of the early period of insurgency in Assam: the various developmental and punitive actions undertaken by ULFA and the text produced in Assamese vernacular media during the period under study. To understand the different dynamics at work when these developmental works were undertaken, one case study was undertaken: the work done to change the course of Dikrong River in Bihpuria in the District of Lakhimpur. Interviews were held with people who claimed to have been associated with the project or who participated or opposed it actively. The names of the respondents are not used in order to protect their identities.

To understand the second, the ULFA related incidents were divided into various sub-headings and an analysis of the contents of two
prominent Assamese vernacular dailies – Ajir Asom and Dainik Asom was completed. Along with it, public statements issued by ULFA were also examined. In conjunction, interviews of editors, former editors and senior journalists were taken to understand the dynamics of the situation prevailing during that period. Personal interviews were also conducted with the surrendered militants who were active during that period. Some available documents of the banned organization were also looked through for an understanding of its proposed ideology. Tone and tenor of the editorials and special columns too were scrutinized especially in the context of the situation. The feature articles that appeared in different dailies, weeklies and fortnightlies were browsed through for articles dealing with the activities of the ULFA pertaining to its romantic super-hero image (termed as Robin Hood image). Articles that appeared in Ajir Asom, a daily and Prantik, and Sutradhar, the fortnightlies were selected to discuss the activities of the ULFA.
II
Rise of Separatist Insurgency:
The Historical Background

One of the basic arguments given against ULFA is the ambiguity of its territorial claim. The changing map of Assam is put as a major argument against ULFA’s claim of a ‘sovereign independent Assam’. ‘Which Assam?’ the question is often asked. The basic logic of this argument is that the present map of Assam is engineered by the Indian State that it inherited from the British. The colonial regime had altered the map of the region many a times that it got from the Burmese occupation, putting different historically related and unrelated regions into it. In this chapter, this change in the map of Assam will be discussed along with the transition of Assamese identity but what is important is that the argument of a changing territorial representation can not obliterate the existence of an Assamese identity developed over centuries, getting crystallized during the colonial period and undergoing different phases of transition. The formation of this emotional oneness, the ‘Assamese identity’ has a very important role in the discussion on the genesis of the ULFA and the rise of the ULFA should be understood as a historical continuum. The colonial policy of replacing Assamese with Bengali, putting historically unrelated Bengali speaking populous district of Sylhet into Assam, lack of opportunity in the tea gardens set up by the British, the grouping plan, successful opposition of Assamese leadership to the grouping before the independence, in post independence period Official Language Movement, Movement for Oil Refinery, Movement on Medium of Instruction and Assam Movement have all contributed to the growth of the separatist ideology of the ULFA. A very brief account of the formation of Assamese identity in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period along with the changing power dynamics is given here. Without this historical understanding one gets the impression of ULFA either as an outright terrorist outfit or a band of patriots fighting to ‘liberate’ Assam.
2.1. Consolidation of Assamese Identity in the Pre-colonial Period

The question of Assamese identity or rather plainly ‘who is an Assamese’ is a complex and controversial issue. Although, Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language spoken and used as a lingua-franca by a large section of the populace had been invoked as a symbol of oneness, with the passage of time the other linguistic minorities have started questioning the validity of this symbol. Many scholars now believe that Assamese identity is not ‘restricted only to the native speakers of Assamese language but embraces all those who come within the broader fold of Assamese culture and the process of Assamese nationality formation is still not complete’.

Present day Assam roughly covers the area ruled by the ‘native’ ethnic groups of Assam – the Ahoms, the Koches, the Bodos, the Kacharis, the Karbis, the Mataks, the Dimasas, the Chutiyas, the Bhuyans etc., before the advent of the British. But it was the military might of the Ahom monarchy, the consolidation of its kingdom annexing a large part of the other smaller nationalities and its continuous rule for around six hundred years as well as the growth of a powerful Koch kingdom, although for a brief period of time compared to the Ahoms (it sought into the acme of glory during the rule of Naranarayana) fostered the formation of a common nationality among the various communities. Specially skilled in wet rice cultivation (Sali) through building dykes and embankments to distribute the flood water, Ahoms transformed progressively the economy of the region which was earlier based on the existing low yielding dry rice cultivation sown broadcast (Ahu and Bau). The surplus yield helped the Ahoms to consolidate its state and bring many contiguous tribes to a progressive economy. Though they constituted the ruling race for about six hundred years, they gave up their language and religion in favour of Assamese and Hinduism and their absorption was so complete that they contributed only a few words to Assamese vocabulary. The adoption of the Hindu faith by the Ahom kings and the active patronage of Hinduism hastened the assimilation of many tribes into Hindu fold from the sixteenth century onwards.

The liberal Neo-Vaisnavism founded by Sankardeva played a pivotal role in bringing different communities to one fold and fostering a sense of oneness among the people of the region. The process of Sanskritization, going on slowly for centuries gathered momentum
during the period of the liberal Vaisnava movement under the guidance of Shankardev (1449-1568) and his disciples Madhavdev (1489-1596), Gopaldev (1541-1611), Aniruddhadev (1553-1624) and others. The mass conversion of Bodo-Kachari tribes and Tai-Ahoms to Hinduism from the sixteenth century onward coincided with this movement\textsuperscript{19}. The Vaisnava movement initiated the tribal communities into a developed means of production and gave them a broader world view. The social economic change was accompanied by the gradual acceptance of Assamese- the dominant language of the valley via an intervening phase of bilingualism, since the end of the fifteenth century\textsuperscript{20}. By attracting diverse communities to its fold, the foundation of Assamese nationality was laid by the philosophy and cultural practices of liberal Vaishnavism and the very concept of Assamese identity came to be inextricably associated with it\textsuperscript{21}.

Without going into the details of the causes of the downfall of the Ahom kingdom, it is nevertheless important to note that the continuous Moamaria revolts which took the form of a civil war (1769-1806) against the ruling Ahom elites saw the disintegration of the Ahom monarchy by the end of the eighteenth century. About half of the population of the Ahom kingdom perished and the economy was completely ruined in this civil war\textsuperscript{22}. But the death blow to Ahom kingdom came from the Burmese Army which invaded Assam in 1817 and 1819 upon the invitation from a section of the Ahom officials. The occupying Burmese forces launched an unprecedented reign of terror on the people of Assam, the horror of which is still extant in the folk memory of the people. When the Burmese army posed a serious threat to the British territory in Bengal, it declared war on the Burmese army and defeated them in the subsequent battles. Finally, the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed between the East India Company and the king of Ava on February 24, 1826 by which the latter renounced ‘all claims upon’ and undertook to abstain from all future interference with the principality of Assam and its dependencies and with the contiguous petty states of Cachar and Jyntia’\textsuperscript{23}. The peace and stability brought about by the British was welcomed initially by the people of Assam, little understanding that this colonial take-over would completely change the old institutions, the non-monetized economic system and particularly the demography of the region. To understand the ideology of separatist insurgency of ULFA, we need to comprehend the changes the British bought about to the region of Assam.
2.2. Assam and the Colonial Geo-politics

First, the administrative map of Assam was drawn and changed by the British according to its convenience, thereby shattering the cloistered existence and the continuous process of assimilation of the people under the Ahom monarchy. When the Ahom kingdom passed into the British hands, it was the first time in the history that Assamese heartland became politically incorporated into British India. So, after the annexation of Assam by the British, the map of Assam changed dramatically. It became the easternmost frontier of British India. During the British occupation there were three major changes in the geography of Assam. After the accession, the British ruled Assam as an ‘appendage of the unwieldy province of Bengal’.

Assam was recognized as a separate province in 1874 but with the appendage of the historically unrelated District of Sylhet within it. The areas of many hill tribes like the Nagas and the Mizos were annexed to the province of Assam afterwards. The policy of sponsored immigration from the East Bengal to the Brahmaputra valley further aggravated the demographic balance of the province. This change of the geographical boundaries and the concomitant demographic alteration had left a seminal impact on the evolution of Assamese identity.

British administration again altered the map of Assam in 1905, which is commonly known as the Partition of Bengal. A new province was created combining Assam and the East Bengal. But the change was short-lived and in the face of strong opposition in Bengal within a period of six years, the pre-1905 map was resurrected. The status of Assamese language, which was still at its embryonic stage of standardization, might have taken a perilous turn, along with the nascent nationalism based on language had this altered status been continued.

Sylhet’s position within the geography of Assam remained a major problem for the middle class Assamese leadership and the intelligentsia of that period till it became a part of Pakistan by virtue of a referendum held in 1947. The gravity of the situation can be gauged by the following statistics. According to the census of 1911, the Bengali speaking people constituted 45.8% of the total population which was more than double the number of Assamese speakers. As Abalakanta Gupta, Congress legislator from Sylhet had put it Assam was a province of several distinct tribes and communities of which Bengalis form the single largest community. The percentage of Bengali speakers however came down
to 26.8% in 1931 as a result of the conscious decision taken by the Bengali Muslim immigrants in the Brahmaputra valley of identifying themselves as Assamese speaking. The Assamese percentage by contrast went up from 22% in 1911 to 32% of the total population in 1931\textsuperscript{25}. The Assamese-Bengali feud continued for a long time even after the independence. Till Assam Movement (1978-85) was started, Hindu Bengalis were regarded as the principal ‘other’ to the Assamese identity. The dividing line was the language. It was a colonial scheme to keep this apprehension of Assamese and not to divert it towards the British. The separation of Sylhet and its merger with East Pakistan by a referendum in the wake of the Independence provided the Assamese community its majority status and quelled the fear of being submerged under a bigger nationalism and instilled a new sense of confidence in the Assamese-speaking middle class.

2.3. Construction of Language Centric Assamese Nationalism

From 1837 to 1873, Bengali was the language of the court and government schools of Assam. This decision devised by the British created a situation where Assamese was regarded as a dialect of Bengali. The Baptist Missionaries put a stiff resistance to the language issue. They got the support of Assamese intelligentsia led by Ananandaram Dhekiyal Phukan. Although the principal purpose of the missionaries was proselytizing, due to its traditional stress upon the development of the vernaculars, they did substantial work in the standardization of Assamese. The standardization of Assamese language and its use in the print had remarkable consequences for the growth of Assamese nationalism and in the years to follow language became the symbol and rallying point of Assamese identity.

The project of standardization of Assamese language and thereby, to prove the autonomy of Assamese language was taken up very seriously by the early architects of modern Assamese nationalism during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in Assam. Development of the language was seen as a first step to develop the nation. Grammar books, dictionaries and high quality literature were produced to standardize and put the language at a higher pedestal. Although initially opposition came from lower Assam, the language spoken in upper and middle Assam was accepted as standard Assamese. This phenomenon of accepting a particular variety as the standard variety for the production of literature defined Assamese nationalism definitively and gave it a strong linguistic mooring.
Another important phenomenon that affected the very fabric of Assamese society was the large scale immigration that took place during the British period and afterwards. Although, Assam has a long history of immigration of different ethnic groups over the centuries and its cultural identity is a product of synthesis of different cultures, the immigration that took place during the British period and afterwards was rather too large in a short span of time for natural assimilation. The demography of the region was permanently altered within a century and this change had a strong bearing upon Assamese identity manifested through different ‘identity-movements’, particularly the Assam Movement.

2.4. British Sponsored Migration

The British colonial administration was instrumental in large scale migrations to the scarcely populated areas of Assam resulting in permanent change in the demography of the region. Although various communities had migrated to Assam over thousands of years contributing to the formation of a common/shared identity, the British sponsored migration was so rapid and so large that it created a sense of fear in the minds of the autochthons of losing their lands to the outsiders and that fear was very logical. The migration to Assam continued even after the independence aggravating the situation further. The colonial and post-colonial migration to Assam is a rather complex and delicate issue requiring an in-depth probing into the various dynamics prevailing since nineteenth century both in Assam as well as the places from where the migration took place. The parameters of this present study do not allow that liberty, so only the major migration trends during the colonial period and their concomitant effects upon Assamese nationality would be discussed in brief.

After its occupation, the British soon discovered the suitability of Assamese soil for the production of tea and by 1839, Assam Company was formed. It was a great success story and by 1850 a large number of Europeans flocked to Assam to claim large tracts of jungles to set up tea gardens. With special concessions bestowed to the British planters, the expansion of tea cultivation necessitated importation of a large number of persons from other parts of India to work as tea garden labourers, as the number of landless cultivators was scarce within the region. Labourers were brought from densely populated areas of Bihar, Orissa, Bengal, Central Provinces, United Provinces and Madras.
Of these majority came from the Chota Nagpur region of Bihar, Gaya and Santhal parganahs. Started in 1853, migration of tea garden labourers on a large scale took place since 1860. It continued till 1937, the number falling low after 1931, by which time the tea garden labourers numbered just under 10 lakhs in Assam.

The next stream of migration was that of Muslim peasants from East Bengal particularly from the districts of Mymensing, Pabna, Bogra and Rongpur. As has been discussed earlier almost half of the population had perished in the Brahmaputra Valley during the Moamaria rebellion and Burmese invasion in Assam. This made Assam a labour short economy. Moreover, the black-fever which broke out by 1888 took an epidemic form resulting in a very slow growth of the native population in Assam. The land abundant Brahmaputra valley failed to produce enough food grains due to the scarcity of labour. This shortage of food-grains to feed the growing population in Assam which was due to labour migration into tea plantations was perhaps the immediate cause of the colonial administration’s encouragement of peasant migration from these East Bengal districts. As land revenue constituted a huge share of the colonial plunder, the other important reason for opening up the huge reserves of cultivable waste lands to these ‘land-hungry’ peasants from East Bengal was too obvious. We get a glimpse of this colonial calculation from the comment of Sir Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam who felt that the millions of acres of uncultivable lands kept as wastes stood for millions of rupees which might be dug out of the soil.

The poor Muslim immigrants who usually had to work as share-croppers or agricultural labourers poured in particularly from the district of Mymensing by the end of the nineteenth century. A myriad of reasons like very high growth of the population, oppressive zamindari system, famines and natural calamities like cyclone and earthquake at their birth place drove them to the virgin and exceptionally fertile lands of Assam where waste lands were made available to them on cheap and easy terms and they got the freedom of settlement. They formed during 1911-21 an appreciable element of population in all four lower and middle districts. “Where there is waste land”, observes Census Superintendent C.S. Mullan in 1931, “Thither flock the Mymensinghias. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staff, a population which must amount to over a half million has transplanted itself from Bengal to Assam Valley during the last
25 years’

The migration of these land-hungry immigrants remained unabated and as the years rolled on brought about changes of far-reaching consequences to the construction and transition of Assamese identity.

Apart from these two major migrations, people poured in from different parts of undivided India to work as skilled labourers in Assam. Majority of the constables, domestic workers, masons, earth-cutters, carters, cobblers, fishermen, boatmen hailed from Bihar and United Province. Besides monopoly of trade, both external and internal, migrants from Rajasthan Marwaris acted as money-changers, bankers and agents of tea garden managers. Though a small community, the Punjabis were the principal contractors, carpenters and skilled mechanics in railways and tea gardens in Upper Assam. The Nepali community which served the British was settled by the latter. Later on people from Nepal also poured in. They took the profession of milkmen and settled in various parts of the state.

2.5. Assam’s Participation in the Struggle for Independence

Apart from contributing to the growth of language and literature, the Assamese middle class realized the need of organizing themselves politically to vent their problems by the latter part of the nineteenth century. Localized bodies like Tezpur Ryot Sabha, Upper Assam Association, Shillong Association, Nagaon Ryot Sabha and Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha were formed in the 1880s. These organizations did not believe in direct confrontation with the colonial government, but it would be wrong if one ignores their genuine interest in the welfare of the common Assamese peasants as one of the basic characteristics of the Assamese middle class was its strong rootedness in the village economy. The need of a broader platform was felt by the Assamese middle class that could effectively represent the wishes and aspirations of the people. Towards the close of 1903, Assam Association was formed with Raja Prabha Chandra Baruah, Jagannath Barua and Manik Chandra Barua as President, Vice President and General Secretary respectively; they were formally elected to their respective offices in the first session of the Association in April 1905 at Dibrugarh.

The Assam Association decided to support the non-cooperation movement in its Tezpur session of 1920s and the process of its merger with Congress was started. Although it had its last session at Jorhat in 1921, it had already turned into a virtual Congress platform. Assam
Pradesh Congress Committee for the Assamese-speaking areas that is the Brahmaputra Valley, was formed on the lines of the principle of linguistic provinces adopted at the Nagpur session of the Congress in 1920. The Surma Valley was to remain under the jurisdiction of the Bengal Pradesh Congress. Soon Congress became immensely popular due to its social reform activities like virtual war on the consumption of opium, which had taken the form of an epidemic among the rural masses in Assam.

In the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement also the people participated in large numbers and hundreds of people were arrested by the colonial administration. Mass involvement of women and students was a salient feature of the movement. Similarly, during the Quit India Movement there was widespread participation and this time the state repression was at its peak. Gandhiji and his non-violent movement was very popular among the masses like the rest of the country.

2.6. Cabinet Mission Plan and Assam Congress Resistance

The Cabinet Mission plan, its threat to Assam and Assamese people and the resistance of Assam Congress against this plan is a part of the independence struggle which is invoked time and again to emphasize upon the indifference of the central leadership towards the people of Assam. The British Cabinet Mission, which visited India in 1946 on the question of transfer of power, put forward a proposal of a three-tier federal Government with only three subjects – defence, foreign affairs and communications – vested in the centre. The remaining subjects were to be with the provinces. According to this arrangement, the provinces were to be grouped into three Sections – A, B and C and recommended the formation of an interim national Government. Although the proposed federal structure of Cabinet Mission was particularly designed to avert the partition of the country, it put the province of Assam in a very precarious position as according to the plan the province was to be clubbed with Bengal in Group C. The composition of the Constituent Assembly members, supposed to sit in Section C, is shown in the following table.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bengal</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>70</td>
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As the figures reveal, in this arrangement Hindus and Muslims were almost evenly poised (though the Muslims had an edge of two seats), but what were in grave danger were the provincial autonomy of Assam and the identity of Assamese linguistic community. As fear gripped the people of Assam, mass protests and demonstrations were held all across the state and in an unprecedented move Assam Legislative Assembly resolved against joining the Section and declared that the provincial constitution could be framed only by Assam’s own representatives. But the central leadership of the Congress was in favour of the Cabinet Mission to avert the partition and was in no mood to listen to Assam Congress. But at this critical juncture, Gandhiji gave his moral support to Assam Congress and eventually both the Congress and the Muslim League rejected the plan. Thus the threat to the Assamese identity was averted just before the independence. But the ‘abandonment’ of Assam at a very crucial period by the central leadership of Congress led by Nehru remained at the political consciousness of the people.

2.7. Post-independence Developments

The separation of Sylhet and its merger with East Pakistan in the wake of the Independence instilled a new sense of confidence in the Assamese-speaking middle class. After the independence, Assam had witnessed a series of movements on diverse issues before the starting of Assam Movement. Important among them were Official Language Movement, the two movements for the establishment of Oil Refineries in Assam, Food Movement and Movement on Medium of Instruction. New states of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh had also emerged from the hill districts that the British had amalgamated into Assam and had kept with it after independence.

Instead of looking individually at the dynamics of each movement, it will be worthwhile to analyse the logic and the development of a discourse of ‘step-motherly treatment’ by the Centre which took a deep root even prior to the Assam movement.

2.8. “The Step Mother at the Centre”: The Discourse

The basic demand of ULFA, ‘the independence of Assam’ has roots in the misgivings and grievances developed with the progress of Assamese sub-nationalist aspiration within the framework of colonial India and in the later, the Indian Union. Unlike many other separatist movements,
ULFA draws its basic claim of secession not from a religious, linguistic, racial or cultural alienation from the pan-Indian identity but from the thesis of a colonial mode of exploitation of the resources of Assam by the ‘metropolitan India’\textsuperscript{38}. This grievance of being neglected by the Central Government, or as has often been referred to the ‘Step motherly’\textsuperscript{39} treatment of Delhi” is a dominant theme in the post independence political discourse of the state\textsuperscript{40}. An understanding of this discourse of grievance might help in comprehending the emergence of a mindset among a section of the people asserting the sovereign right on the territory of Assam. This discourse of ‘colonial hinterland’ and its legitimacy explain the initial popularity of ULFA and its relevance in the politics of Assam even now, in spite of its dwindling mass support due to its alleged blatant acts of terrorism like planting bombs in public places, kidnappings, senseless killing of innocent children at Dhemaji, extortions etc. With the progress of time, ULFA has become increasingly isolated from the people and it is believed in certain quarters that they are now acting at the behest of the foreign powers, committed to destabilize the region. But one should not ignore the fact that the insurgency in the state draws its political legitimacy from the unresolved issues of Assamese nationality vis-à-vis Indian State and from a legacy of bitterness and anger for being deprived of its dues ever since the colonial period. The basic arguments of the discourse have not changed and rather its intensity increased and its manifestation can be seen in the basic ideological permises of ULFA. The discourse often starts with the Cabinet Mission. Here, an attempt is made to see some of the principal arguments of this discourse in the backdrop of the discussion above. The statistics given in the discourse must have changed substantially over the years or may not be accurate completely but no attempt is made here to change the statistics as it might lead to distortions in understanding the discourse.

Desertion of Assam by the central leadership during the crisis of Cabinet Mission often gives credence to the discourse. According to Jadu Kakoty, “Ever since Assam had saved herself from being handed over to Pakistan under the infamous grouping plan, due mainly to the heroic efforts of the then Assam Premier Gopinath Bordoloi Assam’s new era of fight for existence began.”\textsuperscript{41} Although, we know that it was not exactly handing over to Pakistan, but had the proposal been carried on, Assamese identity would have come under a serious threat in a Bengali majority group (Group C). The retreat of the Indian forces in the face of the attacks from the Chinese troupe who had come up to Bombdi

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La, and the alleged surrender of Assam to China by the Indian Government also forms a part of this discourse. The so-called ‘farewell-speech’ of Jawaharlal Nehru at this time is invoked time and again in this discourse of neglect.42

This discourse of neglect gets a very strong legitimacy when it comes to economic underdevelopment of the state in spite of its rich natural resources. Dr. Parameswar Sarma43 compares colonial or quasi colonial exploitation of Assam to that of US South in the 1930s and according to him, although Assam is blessed with immense wealth people are poorest in the country. Tilottoma Misra44 takes the definition of “colonialism” by E. G. Wakefield and shows how it fits well with Assam’s position in India. According to her despite being the country’s largest producers of tea, oil, plywood and forest products, Assam, is one of the poorest and industrially most backward states of India. According to her, although India annually earns millions of rupees as foreign exchange from Assam’s products, the per capita income is one of the lowest in India and the manufactured goods from the Metropolitan centres in other parts of the country are sold in Assam at three or four times their original price.

Misra gives a graphic account of how the British planters acquired lands to establish tea estates at highly concessional rates and how the native enterprise at the plantation was discouraged. After the independence also the tea industry remained in the hands of the foreign investors. When many of these tea gardens were bought up by the Indian capitalists, the situation worsened for the local people. A large number of people were brought from other parts of the country to fill up the managerial and clerical posts and their only claim to the tea jobs happened to be their ‘connections’. Her argument was well supported by the fifth report of the Employment Review Committee (1976), set up by the Assam Assembly. According to it 82 percent of posts in the managerial cadre have been held by people with birthplaces outside Assam. According to it these posts are often filled up without any open advertisement or without notifying to Employment Exchange.45 For a long time, Assam did not have a tea auction centre and thereby losing the revenue of the tea produced in the state. The head office of the Tea Board, which controls most of the tea gardens in Assam, is situated in Calcutta. Whenever the demand of the shifting of the head office to Assam is made, the discourse of ‘colonial hinterland’ gets reinforced.
Petroleum was first discovered at Digboi in Upper Assam in 1889 and Assam continued to produce half of the total crude oil produced in India till around 1977. But curiously enough the Government of India decided to establish the public sector refinery at Barauni, Bihar to process the crude oil produced in Assam. Despite mass agitation and huge public outcry in Assam, the decision was carried on with the lame excuse of the Defence Ministry’s objection of setting up the refinery in Assam. In order to transport the crude oil from Assam to Barauni, a 1400 km long pipeline was constructed during the early sixties. To appease the people of Assam a ‘toy factory’, with a far lesser capacity to that of Barauni was established at Noonmati, near Guwahati. After 12 years, another movement shook the Brahmaputra Valley for the establishment of the second public sector refinery in Assam. This time again, the refinery-cum-petrochemical complex established at Bongaigaon, fell short of people’s expectations. Whereas Barauni had the capacity of 3.30 million tonnes per annum, Noonmati had 0.85 and Bongaigaon had 1.0 and Digboi had just 0.5 million tonnes per annum. This shows that the capacity of these three refineries put together was not equal to the capacity of Barauni refinery alone.

Parag Kumar Das known for his ideological support for an independent Assam goes even further. To break the myth that Assam would not be able to survive without the Centre’s financial aid, he calculates in terms of international market how much Assam would have earned from the crude oil extracted from the region and the tea produced. From 1947 to 1962, Assam would have earned 24 million dollar, from the 1.6 million tonnes crude oil extracted with the average of 15 dollars per tonne. From 1963 to 1970, in eight years 28 million tones – crude oil was robbed from Assam and the price would have been six hundred and sixteen million dollar with an estimated average price of twenty two dollar per tonne. In the same way with the increasing prices of the crude oil in the international market he estimates that Assam had lost five thousand five hundred million dollars in period 1971-80 and twelve thousand seven hundred and forty million dollars in the period 1981-1993. Had Assam developed its own petro-chemical industry, the market price of the products would have been thousands of crores. We do not know the source of the figures or the efficacy of his calculations, but what stands out as important is his discourse which gave legitimacy to ULFA among a large section of the population.
Frequent oil-blockades were carried on during the course of Assam movement. The slogan “Tez dim tel Nidiun (we will give blood but not oil)” was one of the most frequently used slogans during Assam Movement and still finds its place in the wall-writings of the state. Bombing of the oil pipelines is an oft-used strategy of ULFA to garner public sentiment.

Similar glaring neglect had also been observed in the industries of plywood and jute and forms a part of the discourse. Not developing the communication infrastructure is another argument in the discourse of colonial hinterland. Deploping the poor communication system Jadu Kakati remarks⁴⁹, “The river Brahmaputra at present has only one bridge over it. Work on the second bridge has just begun. In contrast, the Ganges has as many as fourteen bridges over it. What a gap!”

Meter gauge railway system was developed by the British for carrying tea from the gardens and not much improvement was made in the rail communication after independence and broad–gauge was introduced only recently and that too after years of agitation. The allegation of the local youths being deprived of the Group C and D jobs in NF Railways by a strong non-Assamese lobby particularly from Bihar and Bengal is a complaint often made in the media. There are a numerous other examples of economic depravity which gives legitimacy to this discourse of colonial hinterland.

Although, the basic demand of Assam movement (1979-85) was detection and repatriation of all the foreign nationals who had allegedly settled down in Assam (particularly from Bangladesh), the ‘step motherly treatment’ of the Central Government remained a major theme within the movement.

2.9. The Assam Movement: Prologue to a Violent Secessionism

The Assam Movement was triggered off in 1979 with an allegation that a large number of foreigners from Bangladesh had got their names included in the voter’s list of Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency, where the by-election had to be held due to the death of Hiralal Patwori the then sitting Member of Parliament. The movement was spearheaded under the leadership of All Assam Student’s Union (AASU). Apart from AASU, a co-ordination body known as the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was formed which included Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD), Purbanchaliya Loko Parsishad( PLP), Assam
Yubak Samaj, the Lawyers Association, and the Asam Sahitya Sabha. The movement was unparalleled in the history of Assam due to its intensity, mass support and emotional upsurge that accompanied. The euphoria it generated and the massive participation of the people in the Brahmaputra Valley made it a mass movement. The demand of the Movement was that all the foreign nationals particularly from Bangladesh and Nepal who had settled down in Assam should immediately be detected and repatriated. The initial demand was to treat 1951 as the cut-off year. The Movement finally came to an end at the midnight of August 15, 1985 when the Movement leaders signed an agreement with the Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi. Assam Assembly was dissolved and a new political party named Asom Gana Parishad was formed by the constituents of the Movement (primarily by the AASU leadership). The newly formed AGP got the majority and formed ministry in the state. The AGP ministry did not address the problem for which the mandate was given and rather the news of rampant corruption, nepotism, lavish weddings and inappropriate behaviour of the ministers in the public places hit the newspapers. It was during this period that ULFA gained grounds in Assam with the tacit support of the AGP government by generating a new euphoria around the symbol of “Swadhin Asom” among a section of the people of Assam. The academic discourse on Assam Movement can be located in between two extreme views. According to one extreme view, the Movement was a CIA induced mass hysteria created around the fear of the Assamese people of being swamped by the outsiders with the active support of the nationalist and regional bourgeoisie to check the burgeoning left-democratic forces. Although accepting of the fear of the indigenous people, according to this view, the immigration in Assam must be viewed in a historical continuum and all minorities should not be branded as ‘foreigners’.

According to the second view, the movement sprang from a very valid fear of the sons of the soil being outnumbered by the people who had migrated recently to the region. The example of Tripura, where the tribal autochthons had been outnumbered by the migrant population was often invoked by the proponents of the second view.

A debate between these two extreme views is beyond the scope of this study, but what is important in this context is the recognition of the fact that ULFA grew up as one of the sub-streams of the movement. As mentioned above, a strong argument in favour of the view that Assam
was being exploited as a colonial hinterland even after independence and its legitimacy helped ULFA to get acceptance among a section of the people, but the immediate emergence of ULFA can be located in two important aspects of the Assam movement: the inherent violence and the separatist tendency of the movement. An understanding of these twin facets of the movement would certainly throw light on the appearance of the ULFA almost immediately after the Assam movement.

In an article titled “Sadmabeshi Bicchinntatabad”\(^{51}\) (Disguised Secessionism), written in November, 1980, Homen Borgohain, a very prominent journalist and littérature attracted one’s attention to the dangerous trends of the Assam Movement. According to him, the Movement had sown the seeds of distrust and disunity among the various communities living in the state and that the character of the Movement was fascist. But what is important in this context is that he talked about a pattern which got clearer with the passing events. According to him although the sole proclaimed objective of the Movement was repatriation of the foreign nationals, but upon closer examination one can see that from the very beginning an effort was made to build a public consensus to secede all ties of Assam from India and the intensity of this effort was stronger than the effort to build public opinion to repatriate the foreigners. The aim of the organizer was to establish an independent Assam by snapping its ties from India. But the fear of the law had prevented them from expressing it clearly and they had rather adopted a tortuous way. Borgohain reasoned that their main aim at that moment was to paralyze the state administration and thereby to necessitate a situation where the declaration of army rule would become unavoidable for the Central Government. As the Army rule could never be popular and as it would be declared only in Assam out of all the states in India naturally the people of Assam would develop a mental distance from the rest of India. Then it would be easier for the separatist leaders to launch their campaign against the Indian State. Then he narrates how this tendency was operational in the programmes of the movement. According to him, at the economic front, the crude oil blockade, at the political front, the boycott of the all India parties, at the administrative level creating mistrust about the All India Services and bid to destroy the government administration and Legislative Assembly, launching a campaign against the military and paramilitary forces are part of the greater design to implant deeply a mindset against the Indian State in the minds of the people of Assam. In his opinion, a section of the leadership was striving to snap all
emotional, political and administrative ties with India and this effort was quite well planned. He cautions the people of Assam against this dangerous trend and appeals for a stiff resistance against it.

It must be remembered that 1980 was quite early and the existence of ULFA was not known to the people of Assam at that time. A senior respected journalist Borgohain had the uncanny ability to prognosticate a situation that took place after ten years in Assam. But what is important here is to understand the link between AASU led Assam Movement and the separatist insurgency of ULFA. The separatist trend of Assam Movement gets crystallized with the emergence of ULFA.

Even the government was also well aware of the separatist tendency of the Assam Movement as evident from the statement of P. C. Sethi, Home Minister of India in Loksabha, March 14, 1983:

Posters, leaflets with slogans have appeared from the beginning of the Movement which certainly indicate how the mind of some elements has been functioning. Some of these sample slogans were –

“We shall form our country with blood of martyrs”
“When Assam will be free”
“India has no right to rule Assam”
“Assam region should think of an independent United State of Assam after separating from India”
“Indian Dogs Leave Assam”

There were several leaflets galore advocating violence and sentiments similar to the above slogans. No doubt AASU/ AAGSP have denied their association with such activities. But there has never been any strong denouncement and condemnation.  

Along with this separatist tendency, what helped the growth of ULFA was the inherent violence in the movement. The overwhelming situation of tension and violence got transformed in a more systematic expression of violence by ULFA. Although non-violence was the proclaimed strategy of the movement, the ground reality was prevalence of an unprecedented violent situation. Under the surface of the declared non-violent programmes of the movement like satyagraha, picketing, people’s curfew etc there were strong strains of violence in the movement.
This violent trend got its first manifestation against the Left parties and systematic attacks were carried out against cadres and sympathizers in all parts of the state. Termed as “Desadrohi Bodans or traitors” the cadres were attacked and publicly humiliated. The strategies like mass boycott and ostracism was practiced throughout the state. It was just not confined to the Left cadres but also extended to anybody who dared to question the plan and programme of the movement. Many prominent intellectuals also came under the attack of the chauvinist forces. Although “CPI (M)” is a national political party soon its use was transformed to an abuse meaning a renegade. As documented by Natun Sahitya Parishad 67 people from the Left parties got killed during the Assam Movement. From the Assam movement ULFA inherited this culture of intolerance and the mass-graves found in the camps of ULFA at Lakhipathar as well as many kidnappings and killings bear testimony to this mindset.

In March 1982, the Assam State Legislature stood dissolved in the wake of repeated horse-trading and political destabilization and it became a constitutional imperative to hold the election to elect new legislature by March 1983. The AASU decided to boycott the election without the revision of the old electoral rolls and this soon snowballed into a major political crisis in the state. During the so called illegal election, the members and the supporters of the political parties who joined the election fray including the Congress had to bear the brunt of the wrath of the supporters of the movement. Many were killed including a contestant. Side by side there were systematic attacks against the minorities. The rather infamous massacre at Nellie, where hundreds of Bengali Muslims were butchered within a few hours by the traditionally armed mob composed mostly of Lalung (Tiwa) tribals on February 18, 1983 bore testimony to this systemic violence of the movement. Before the elections of 1983, over 1600 bridges were burnt by the supporters in order to obstruct the election personnel’s entry into various constituencies. Even schools where polling stations were set up were put to flames. Explosives had also reached a section of the youth during the movement. Along with the crude bombs, making of the pipe-guns and other fire-arms became very common during the course of the movement. Between 1979- 84 a minimum of 471 cases of bomb blasts were reported to the police and officially 101 persons died as a result of the blasts at various places in Assam. State repression was also at its peak particularly during the elections of 1983. The CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) let loose a reign of terror on the
Assamese youths. In his popular commentary on ULFA, Paragmoni Aditya traces the rebellion of Rajib Rajkonwar (Arabinda Rajkhowa) to the atrocities committed by CRPF and Assam Police on him during the course of the movement. Undeniably, the violence committed by the central forces helped the growth of a strong anti-Centre feeling in the minds of the people of Assam.

2.10. ULFA: One Among Many

The ULFA was one among many radical groups which sprang up in different corners of the state during the Assam movement. After the Assam Accord, most of these umbrella organizations of the movement just fizzled out. The AASU had a powerful extremist component in different parts of the Brahmaputra Valley and it floated a volunteer force for more ‘direct actions’. Parallel to this, there emerged many loose extremist groups throughout Assam. Late Rabijit Chowdhury mentions some of these groups like North East Regional Defence Army (NERDA), Seven Unit Liberation Army (SULA), United Liberation Army of Seven States (ULASS), NAMMAT etc. Apart from these organizations, APLA (Assam People’s Liberation Army) founded in Tezpur was very active and drew members from the different parts of Assam. People still remember the activities of JMMB (Jagrata Matri Mukti Bahini) around Pathsala area in the lower Assam. It would not be an exaggeration to say that these were rather the underground organizations of the over-ground AASU/ AJYCP activists in different colours and shapes. To achieve the goals of the Assam movement they advocated ‘direct action’ or precisely violence. They targeted the perceived enemies of the Assam movement like the hostile bureaucrats and the police officers, the Congress workers and the Communist cadres. The ULFA’s first official martyr Hari Barkakoti who was killed in his attempt to kill Hiteswar Saikia in on 19th April 1980 is a pointer to this fact. Among these disparate groups, only the ULFA survived after the Assam Accord. In a personal interview to the author, the self styled Commander-in-Chief of APLA, Arpan Bezbaruah revealed that he had to dissolve the APLA upon the insistence of the then Home Minister, Bhrigu Kumar Phukan who was a very ‘good friend’ of his. The success of the ULFA may be traced to the resilience of its leaders to carry on even after the Assam Accord and to the myriad of factors like the geographical location of Upper Assam where it was first established and its well organized network across the state. Naturally, it got the support from a section of the disgruntled youths who had
dedicated their academic careers for the movement but got nothing when the leaders captured the reins of the government. Many political commentators believe that a section of the youths, who were influenced by the Naxal movement, had also joined ULFA. \(^6^1\) Tactically, what helped ULFA’s growth was the strong military wing that it built along with the network it developed with other insurgent groups in the Northeast and neighbouring Myanmar and most importantly the tacit support given to it by the AGP ministry in its first term. On the ideological front a heady mixture of scientific socialism blended with Assamese chauvinism was floated thereby attracting a section of the youth not fully convinced with the chauvinism of AASU during the Assam movement. But, most importantly this theoretical positioning gave ULFA its distinctiveness and political legitimacy.

### 2.11. Conclusion

A strong discourse of neglect of Assam and exploitation of its resources during the British and post-British period underpinned the emergence of the ULFA as an ideology. After independence, the realization that the region got nothing from Delhi without agitation or protest got strengthened with every passing year in popular Assamese consciousness and had a strong bearing on the development of a mindset opposing the grand narrative of the making of an Indian nation-state. But the development of the ULFA as an organization was precipitated by the Assam movement and the inherent violence within the movement. There grew many other similar armed organizations like the ULFA during the movement. But after the euphoric end of the movement (which saw the ascendance of the former movement leaders in the seats of power), only the ULFA survived. The total failure of the AGP government to address the core issues raised during the movement, and the AASU leaders clinging to the AGP government in its first tenure helped the ULFA to emerge as an alternative nationalist force in Assam.
As has been discussed in the earlier chapter, violence was integral to
the Assam movement and manifested itself more after the election
boycott of 1983. Moreover, it has also been observed that a stream of
the movement was expressing its dissatisfaction with the Central
Government and the slogans of secessionism formed a part of the
repertoire of the Assam movement particularly after 1983. But during
the movement, this stream was ignored just as a minor aberration and
the acts of violence by the supporters of the movement were seldom
reported in the mainstream Vernacular Press as there was a tacit
acceptance of violence as the part of the movement. So, the violent
acts of the ULFA and the other extremist groups, during the phase of
the Assam movement, were not taken seriously by the Press. Let us see
how the Assamese Vernacular Press reacted to the activities of the ULFA
when it emerged with a distinct political ideology after 1985. Most of
the news pieces are collected from Dainik Asom and Ajir Asom, the
two widely circulated dailies of that period to put the events in
chronological order. Prantik and Sutradhar are the two monthly
magazines that have been used for this study to see the debates around
the activities of ULFA during that period.

3.1. Bank Robberies of ULFA and Their Representations

Before the ULFA started realizing the potentiality of raising a huge
fund by extorting from the tea gardens and business houses, it
committed a series of robberies in the banks. It is interesting to note
the news coverage of the robberies since the ULFA and its objectives
were not so widely known to the people at that time. There was a halo
of mystery surrounding the identities of these ‘robbers’. Till that time,
the ULFA was a little known organization and the distinction between
‘robbers’ and ‘revolutionaries’ had not been made yet. It is interesting
to see how these events were portrayed in the Press. Three of the major
bank robberies committed by the ULFA during the period 1985-90 and
their representations in Assamese vernaculars would be analyzed to
see the images that were created about the ULFA. The first was committed on May 10, 1985, the second on March 1, 1986 and the third on May 11, 1987.

When the first major bank robbery was committed by the ULFA on May 10, 1985, Hiteswar Saikia was the Chief Minister of Assam whose election was not accepted by a large section of the people of Assam and also there was a lull in the activities of the Assam movement as the process of negotiation between the Central Government and the AASU leadership was going on. The target of the ULFA was the Silpukhuri branch of United Commercial Bank. It was committed at around 11 am and the manager of the bank Girish Chandra Goswami was shot dead during the crime. One of the ‘robbers’ Mahikanta Hatibaruah who hailed from Makum was caught by the police. In Dainik Asom, this news was published as the leading story on May 11. Another news appeared on May 14, where it was reported (citing the police source) that another six persons were arrested. Although not given prominence, news appeared on the front page of Dainik Asom on May 23 titled Bankor Dokaitir Logot Ugroponthir Sangjog: Policeor Bigyopti (Militants Involved in the Bank Robbery: According to Police Press Release). According to this press release, self styled ‘Chairman’ of United Liberation Front of Asom, Buddheswar Gogoi, the ‘General Secretary’ Suren Dihingiya and ‘Minister of Foreign Affairs’ Bhuban Borgohain, ‘Ambassador’ Bhimkanta Buragohain along with Likhan Moran and Amulya Gogoi had been arrested in connection with the robbery and others including Muhikanta Hatibaruah, Kalpajyoti Neog and Rajen Phukan (Bhaiti), Swapan Kakoti, Bikash Narayan Sarma, Pabitra Gohain, Mukut Gohain, Munin Gogoi and Rajen Kumar Baruah were directly involved in the robbery. According to the release, this organization the United Liberation Front of Asom maintained a very close link with NSCN of Nagaland. The significance of this news lies in the fact that first, it showed the effectiveness of the Assam Police in cracking the network of the ULFA at that time and second, many of the names mentioned above played a very pivotal role in the growth of the ULFA in the years to come. Bhimkanta Buragohain known as ‘Mama (uncle)’ in the organization still holds the portfolio of ‘Adviser’ and was caught during the Bhutan operation. Before his surrender, Kalpajyoti Neog was also involved in many dreaded operations of the ULFA. As we later know, the claim and account of the police was quite correct and it is often surmised by the security establishment that had stringent measures been taken during that early period, the ULFA could
not have developed into such a formidable organization later on. An analysis of the editorial of *Dainik Asom* reveals an interesting picture. On May 13, 1985, an editorial appeared “*Asomotu Arombho Hoise (It has started also in Assam)*” on the issue of bank robbery in Assam. At first, the editorial dwelled on the causes of the crimes like bank robberies and linked it to the economic underdevelopment and increasing gap between the different economic classes in India. But it cautioned that the terrorists have also engaged themselves with looting of the banks to amass money. It brought the example of the Sikh terrorists who had looted banks in Punjab and Haryana at that time. According to the editorial, it was a matter of anxiety that this trend had started in Assam also. It acknowledged that there was an effort to start terrorism in Assam and the robbery was an act of the ULFA, some of whose cadres were taking training in Burma. So, the editorial urged the government to ensure safety of the bank employees and to take appropriate measures to stop the menace of the terrorists who were trying to expand their support base in Assam. It showed that although termed as ‘robbers’, the newsmen were aware of the activities of the ULFA and in the editorial, the ULFA was termed as a ‘terrorist group’ trying to expand its base in Assam. Obviously, no sympathy was shown to the organization and its cadres were called ‘miscreants’.

On March 1, 1986 another bank robbery took place at Namrup where a sum of 50 lakhs was looted during the operation and the Officer-in-Charge of Namrup Police Station, Putul Bora died and three other policemen were injured besides customers and bank employees in the exchange of fire between the police and the ‘robbers’. Although the news appeared on the front page of *Dainik Asom*, it was surprisingly within a small caption only. Interestingly, no follow up was made in *Dainik Asom*. Unlike the previous occasion, neither any follow up of the event was made in the daily nor was any censure issued against the government and the outfit. No editorial appeared condemning the ‘deteriorating law and order situation’ in the state. ULFA’s involvement was not even mentioned. The cause of this silence may be traced to the fact that the very mention of the bank robbery might have shown the failure of the state government headed by the former AASU leaders and the mainstream Assamese Press had still to get over from the hangover of the Assam movement, when the leaders of AASU were held as impeccable and their positions unquestionable.
The third most important bank robbery took place on May 11, 1987. According to *Dainik Asom* four youths armed with stenguns hijacked a taxi carrying 46 lakhs in cash from the Fancy Bazar branch of the Union Bank of India to be deposited in the Reserve Bank, after overpowering the Bank’s security guard. The police acted swiftly and within a week the culprits were apprehended and the money was recovered. According to police report several among those arrested confessed their links with the ULFA. Among the ‘robbers’ arrested in the connection with the robbery were Sunil Nath and Sailen Dutta Konwar. Nath became the Publicity Secretary of the ULFA taking the pseudonym *Siddharta Phukan* and was the ‘voice’ of the ULFA till his surrender in 1992. Dutta Konwar was also a top ranking ULFA leader before his surrender. Interestingly, they were also office bearers of AASU at that time.

### 3.2. Political Assassinations by the ULFA and Reflections in Media

As the ULFA consolidated its military wing by procuring sophisticated weapons and as cadres started coming back well-trained in guerilla warfare, it engaged itself in a number of killings of the leaders and the workers of the political parties in Assam. During 1985-90, the Congress (I) bore the brunt of this terror strategy of the ULFA the most. It may be mentioned that Congress (I) became very unpopular in Assam after 1983 and there was a general resentment prevailing against the Congress leaders at that time in Assam. The leaders of the United Minorities Front (UMFA), formed after the Assam Accord to protect the rights of the minorities in Assam also came under attack. The United Reservation Movement Council of Assam (URMCA), a conglomeration of different ethnic organizations under the leadership of CPI (ML) resisted the ULFA in many places at the grassroots and there were attacks and counter-attacks between these two organizations in many places of Assam. The characteristics of the URMCA were quite different from other political organizations and its resistance was the only organized resistance to the ULFA at that period in Assam and so the ‘ULFA-URMCA conflict’ warrants a separate discussion. The reports on some selected political assassinations are analyzed here to understand the role of the Vernacular Press during the initial years of the ULFA.

On February 19, 1986, Tankeswar Dihingiya, an ex-minister of Hiteswar Saikia ministry was shot at by the ULFA cadres in Sivasagar and he
succumbed to his bullet injuries on February 20, 1986. In Dainik Asom it was published on the front page on February 21 Gulibiddho Prakton Manti Dihingiyar Mrityu (Bullet- ridden Ex-Minister Dihingiya died). The involvement of the ULFA was not mentioned anywhere in the news. An editorial appeared on February 24, 1986 titled “Hingshro Paribex Uddegjonok Hoi Ahise” (“The Violent Situation is Getting Alarming”). It starts with the terrorist attacks across India, particularly in Punjab, Delhi and Kashmir and expresses concern over the growing clout of the terrorists. It condemns the killing of Tankeswar Dihingiya in broad daylight and attributes it to the conspiracy of a circle with a ‘vested interest’. According to it, this circle does not want the implementation of Assam Accord and the socio-economic development of the state. It also, congratulated the people of Assam for choosing the path of non-violence, shown by Mahatma Gandhi during the historical Assam movement in spite of the provocations. So, the editorial called upon the people of Assam to keep their faith on the ‘people’s government’65 and to follow the rule of law. It is interesting to see the unfaltering loyalty of Dainik Asom to the AGP ministry in the beginning of its rule. It is also interesting to see the daily attribution of the act of the ULFA to a ‘circle with a vested interest’ which was committed to block the socio-economic development of the state. The term nyosto swartha sokro (the circle with vested interests) is a very commonly used term in most Assamese Vernacular texts and mostly used when the author tries to defend a group and at the same time is not too sure about whom to blame.

Kalipada Sen, the President of United Minorities Front and President of Citizen’s Rights Preservation Committee (CRPC) was shot dead in his residence on September 17, 1986. According to the reports three unidentified gunmen stormed into his residence around 6.30 pm and sprayed seven rounds of bullets. The report of his killing appears on September 19 in Dainik Asom. The name of ULFA did not appear in the news. After describing the incident, the staff reporter expressed suspicion that this act was the handiwork of a circle with vested interests (nyosto swartha jorito mahal) wanting to foment communal tension in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Home Minister, Bhrigu Kumar Phukan was quoted as saying that the murder was an ill attempt of a ‘section’ to malign the Assam Gana Parishad ministry. According to him although there were attempts on the life of Sen during the Assam movement, his killing took place only during the rule of the AGP. So, the Home Minister averred that the murder was committed to put the AGP ministry
in a fix. An editorial condemning the killing of Kalipada Sen appeared in *Dainik Asom* on the same day (September 19, 1986). It echoed what the staff reporter had commented and the Home Minister was quoted in the news.

On the night of January 8, 1987, Rajib Rajkhowa the Vice President of the Jorhat District Youth Congress (I) and son of the former Forest Minister, Shri Dinanath Rajkhowa and Ranjit Barua, a Congress worker and a friend of Rajib Rajkhowa were killed on the spot when group of assassins sprayed them with bullets from automatic weapons near Eeli cinema at Jorhat. The news appeared on January 10 in *Dainik Asom* as *Durbrittor Hatot Prakton mantrir Putra Nihot (The Son of the Former Minister Killed by the Miscreants)*. The news quoted Bhrigu Kumar Phukan as ordering to nab the culprits in a week’s time. The news also gave the statement of the leader of the Congress (I) Legislative Party where the immediate intervention of the Prime Minister was sought due to the deteriorating law and order situation in Assam. No editorial or follow up news appeared in *Dainik Asom*.

On September 16, 1987, unidentified gunmen shot dead Sonitpur District Congress (I) Committee president Shri Dulal Bhuyan on Dandiram Road in Tezpur town. On September 17, 1987 the news appeared on the front page of *Dainik Asom* under a small head *Sonitpuror Congress Sabhapatik Hatya (Sonitpur Congress President Shot Dead)*. According to this report, the assailants were suspected to be the members of the United Liberation Front of Assam, an underground extremist organization. It was a rather general report and provided information like the Superintendent of Police and other top brass running to the place of the incident and the Chief Minister and the Home Minister condemning the incident in very strong words. No editorial was written in the paper on this act of violence.

On July 23, 1990, Rohiteswar Saikia, younger brother of Hiteswar Saikia, the former Chief Minister of Assam fell to the bullets of the suspected ULFA militants. The murder was covered routinely in *Dainik Asom*. On July 25, an editorial appeared as *Samoy Thakutei Sajag aru Satarka huwa Proyujon (We Should Be Alert When We have Time)* condemning the incident. In the editorial, it was argued that the violent means have failed all over the world. It also attracted readers’ attention to the new trend of political assassination in the state and emphasized on keeping utmost vigil in matters of such importance.
3.3. Attack on the Law Enforcing Agencies

To emerge as a ‘parallel law enforcing agency’, the ULFA had to break the morale of the police force, the State’s law enforcing agency in Assam. The ULFA carried out a series of attacks on the police officials against whom its cadres harbored a grouse and it was quite successful in breaking the confidence of the police during that period. Three attacks on the security personnel and their families are analyzed here to see how the vernaculars described the events and their consequences.

On September 10, 1989 at about 8.30 pm, the ULFA shot dead the wife of the Superintendent of Police, Dibrugarh, A.K. Mullick. The Personal Security Officer, Ramnath Singh, and the Driver Banikanta Handique also died in the attack. Mullick was not in the car. His two children, who were also in the car, however had a narrow escape. This news appeared in *Ajir Asom* 12 September on front page as “*Atotayir Guli salonat Police Bixoyar Patnike dahri Nihoto Tini* (Three, including the Wife of the Police Officer Killed by the Assailants).

According to the report Mullick’s wife and the other two were brutally killed by the miscreants when they were coming back from Tinsukia to Dibrugarh. Although ‘durbritto (miscreants)’ was the chosen word to denote the assailants, indirect reference to the ULFA being involved with the crime was made in the report. One paragraph was added that the ULFA, the extremist organization of Assam had started its terrorist activities in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and Dibrugarh and had killed at least seven people. It is also important to note that the activities of the ULFA are described as *santrashbadi karjokolap* meaning “acts of terrorism”. However, as no follow-up news appeared, it seems that the police could not arrest any of the assailants. In *Ajir Asom* no editorial was written condemning the killing of these three innocent people and the presence of the two children in the car was also not highlighted to show the senselessness of the attacks organized by the ULFA.

On July 29, 1990, Daulat Singh Negi, Superintendent of Police, Dibrugarh district, his personal security officer and the driver were gunned down by the ULFA activists at Lahoal in Dibrugarh district at around 3 pm. He earlier held the posts of Special Superintendent, CID, at Guwahati and SP (City) Guwahati. It may be mentioned here that by this time the situation had changed completely and there was an all pervading influence of the ULFA in Assam. As is obvious from the reports it was perceived as an act of revenge on the part of the ULFA.
and Negi’s dealings with the ‘people’ was described as “tyrannical” in a statement issued by the ‘Publicity Secretary’ of the ULFA, Sri Siddhartha Phukan on August 10, 1990. It was alleged that he had tortured Hirokjyoti Mahanta, one of the top leaders of the ULFA in police custody. It was also reported, across media, that Mahanta vowed revenge. The ULFA had kidnapped H.K.L. Das, the General Manager, his son and the driver on July 16, 1990 and bargained the release of Mahanta and two of his accomplices. On July 28, 1990 the hostage-drama came to an end with the release of the three ULFA leaders, Hirokjyoti Mahanta, Anadar Thakuriya and Amrit Rabha by the State Government. On the 29th, the hostages were released by the ULFA and minutes after the release of the hostages the SP was shot dead in Dibrugarh. The Home Minister, Bhrigu Kumar Phukan gave his resignation the same day owning moral responsibility of the killing of Negi. These three news reports almost occupied the entire front page of *Dainik Asom* on July 30. On July 31, the news of the last rites of Negi performed at Guwahati was well covered in the first page of this daily and an editorial appeared as “*Paristhitit akou Uttejona (The Situation is Tense again)*”. The editorial dealt with the prevailing situation and described it as very serious. According to it, it was not clear till that time how far the behaviour of Negi with the detained ULFA leaders during his posting in Guwahati had a bearing on his killing. But it did not deny such a connection. Then it dwelled upon the situation arising out of the resignation of the Home Minister. As the tenure of the government was almost coming to an end it opined that this decision on the part of the Home Minister would adversely affect his own Party. The last paragraph of the editorial is quite important. It avoided a discussion on whether the incumbent government was competent to deal with the situation or not. Rather it cautioned that the problem of Assam could not be solved by the harsh measures of the police. According to it, if the situation was looked only from the perspective of the police, it would be like the blind’s description of the elephant. The editorial concluded with words of appreciation for the ULFA. According to it the leaders of the ULFA had shown the courtesy of returning the hostages by apologizing to them. In the editorial, not a single word was written condemning the killing of Negi.

On September 3, 1990, the in-charge of Laluk Police Outpost, Sub-Inspector, Atul Sarma, was gunned down at Laluk Tiniali in Lakhikpur District around 4 pm. The news of his killing appeared in *Dainik Asom* on November 4 as *Police Bixoyak Guliyai Hotya (Police
Official Shot Dead) on the front page and was put in a box to lay emphasis on the importance of the news. According to the report, the assailants had come in a blue Maruti car. Neither follow up report nor any commentary appeared in *Dainik Asom*.

There are other instances of attacks on the people from the law enforcement and the intelligence agencies in the state during this period and in no time both of these state agencies cowered down. According to a retired police official who does not want to be mentioned, “As it was quite discernable to most of us in the police force that the AGP ministry at that period provided covert support to the ULFA and was doing nothing substantial against its growing clout, most in the force decided to be very cautious and remained mute spectators like any common citizen of the state during that period. But there were some intrepid ones like Negi who had to pay the price for sailing against the tide.”

3.4. Attack on the Industries and the Business Establishments

The industries and business establishments in the state had to pay the maximum price at the hands of the ULFA. There were reports of extortions and killings from all parts of the state. Here some of the selected reports of the attacks are analysed to assess the reactions of the Vernacular Press.

On June 21, 1988, the Senior Public Relation Officer of Oil India Limited, Duliajan, K.P.V. Ramamurthy was gunned down at his official residence. The news appeared in *Dainik Asom* on the 23rd as *Oilor Ejon Usso Bixoyak Guliayai Hatya (A Top Official of the OIL Shot Dead)*. It gives a description of how the killing was carried out. According to the report some leaflets of the organization had been recovered from the site. An editorial appeared in *Dainik Asom* as *Duliyanjanor Hatyakanda (The Murder at Duliyanjan)*. It condemned the killing and described it as a matter of concern. It also stated that the killing may be the handiwork of some miscreants who might have left the ULFA’s leaflets to conceal their identity. Then it dwelled on the issue how these killings were tarnishing the image of the Government and the Opposition taking advantage of the Government’s failure to nab the killers. But it defended the ruling state government by putting the argument that even the central government which was ruling Punjab during that period had not been able to check the killing of the dozens of civilians everyday. On June 26, another report appeared in that daily
that the Police had nabbed three persons including one member of the ULFA. On June 30, yet another report of the arrest of a former trade union leader appeared which threw light on personal enmity between the top level officials of OIL being the motive behind the killing of Ramamurthy. According to the report, there were reasons to suspect that the ULFA was used to conceal the motive of personal vendetta. But after this report, no other report appeared regarding this killing.

On October 15, 1988, Girdharlal Harlalka, the ex-President of Kamrup Chamber of Commerce, Guwahati and a prominent businessman of the city was shot dead in his bedroom at his residence in Kedar Road, Guwahati. The news report appeared on October 16, 1988 in Dainik Asom as “Bixisto Byboxayi Haralakkak Guliyai Hotya: Dujon Ahot (Prominent Businessmen Shot Dead: Two Injured)”. After giving a description of the incident, the report dwelled upon the reactions of the Chief Minister, the Home Minister and the leaders of the different political parties. No editorial appeared to condemn the incident in Dainik Asom.

On January 20, 1990, the Kamrup Chamber of Commerce President Shanker Birmiwal was shot dead by armed miscreants. Birmiwal was returning from the Chamber office to his Gandhibasti residence when unidentified gunmen fired at him in front of his residence killing him on the spot. The killing of Birmiwal coincided with the visit of Deputy Prime Minister, Choudhury Devi Lal and the 24-hour trade Bandh called by the Federation of All Assam Chambers of Commerce and Industry against deteriorating law and order situation in the State. The ULFA took the responsibility for killing Birmiwal for his alleged role in giving leadership to Hindi expansionism in the state and for organizing anti-Assam propaganda by manipulating different trade organizations in the State. In the editorial “Ugrapanthiye Sristi Kora Paristhit (The Situation Created by the Insurgents) Dainik Asom reiterated its stand that only administrative measures would not solve the problem of ULFA, and averred that the ULFA had taken advantage of the administrative failures and received widespread support in the state.

The killing of Surendra Paul, the brother of Sir Swaraj Paul and the Chairman of Assam Frontier Tea Estate shook the business establishment and particularly the tea lobby. Some observers believe that this killing had far reaching consequences and probably hastened the declaration of the President’s rule in Assam. He was shot dead on
9th April, 1990 at Kharjan near Tinsukia in Dibrugarh district. The report appeared in *Dainik Asom* on April 11, as “Udyogpati Palok Hatya Hondorbhot Ejon Greptar (One Arrested for the Killing of the Industrialist Pal), which gave a description of his killing. According to it, one cadre of the ULFA was arrested in this connection. The editorial of 13th April, 1990 discussed the challenge thrown by terrorism in the country and commented that at the same time when Paul was killed near Tinsukia, Assam, the Vice Chancellor of Kashmir University, his Personal Secretary and the General Manager of HMT, who had been kept as hostages were killed by the Kashmiri militants. However, it made a distinction between the situations of Punjab and Kashmir and the situation of Assam. It also stated that it would be a great blunder to treat the situation created by ULFA as merely law and order situation.

The last piece of news that needs to be looked at is the air-lifting of nine senior tea garden managerial staff along with their families on November 8, 1990. This exercise was carried out as a joint mission by the Army, Air Force, the Indian Airlines, and Research and Analytic Wing (RAW) keeping the State Government entirely in the dark. The ground was prepared for the declaration of the President’s rule and to launch army operations. Interestingly, a day before the incident, the National Front Government had lost the vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha and resigned. So, the news of fall of National Front Government got prominence in the pages of *Dainik Asom and Ajir Asom* and the air-lifting of the tea-officials was simply ignored. Although, other news reports appeared in the papers that were related to the threat of the militants to the tea-industry in Assam, this information could not find its way to the Assamese newspapers.

### 3.5. The Parallel Administration

ULFA’s strength and popularity grew very fast and by 1988 its strength was formidable and its influence was visible in every sphere of public life in the Brahmaputra Valley. There was none to very little resistance from the police and the administration as the Assam government at that time had a patronizing attitude towards the ULFA and it ran its ‘parallel government’ till the President’s rule was declared on November 28, 1990. According to a former top ranking police officer, “whenever we got the ULFA boys arrested, they usually got released very easily with the interference of the AGP ministers at that time.” As is evident from the newspaper readings, the AASU also interfered...
on a couple of occasions to get ULFA cadres released. We get a glimpse of the parallel administration of ULFA in the reporting of the vernacular press. Although, not given special prominence, news poured in from all over the state about the punitive actions taken by the ULFA against the ‘anti-socials’ like drunkards, gamblers, the illicit liquor sellers, the ‘morally loose characters’ and the ‘fake ULFAs’ and the welfare activities initiated by it like building roads, embankments, schools etc. The logic behind these ‘reform activities’ as put forward by Siddhartha Phukan, the ‘Publicity Secretary’ of the ULFA at that time was that the organization had stepped up social welfare activities for the requisite mass support to attain ‘sovereign Assam’ through ‘total social revolution’. The news pertaining to the ‘social reform’ of the ULFA appeared mostly on the page reserved for the local news across the state, although some news got the front page coverage of the dailies and the weeklies. When one revisits the ‘golden period’ of the ULFA by describing and analyzing some of the news pieces that appeared during that period about the ‘social reform’ activities of ULFA curiously the papers reflect familiarity with the ULFA – the organization. This familiarity is most apparent in the way the organization’s name appeared in Assamese in these news pieces. Mostly it was written as ‘alpha’ (in the Assamese script) the way most Assamese people pronounced ‘ULFA’ and very rarely the Assamese equivalent of it ‘Sanjukta Mukti Bahini Asom’ was used. This familiarity and informality reflected the acceptability and legitimacy of the ULFA in the rural and semi-rural areas during that period from where the local correspondents reported. The news pieces can be broadly divided into four categories – first, the public humiliation of the ‘offenders’, second the attack on the lives of the ‘offenders’, third the constructive work undertaken by the ULFA and fourth the all pervading influence of the ULFA in major public occasions of that period. Three news items of each category are represented here from a range of activities of the ULFA in its early period.

3.5.1. The Public Humiliation of the ‘Offenders’

On November 21, 1989, the news appeared in Dainik Asom that an employee of Block Elementary Education was made to kneel down in the crossing of Chabua town from 8.30 a.m. for one hour for a period of one week and he had accepted the punishment from November 14. The allegations against him included embezzling money from the unemployed youths by luring them with jobs, indecent behaviour
against young women etc. All the allegations of ULFA had been mentioned in a piece of paper which was signed to be true by that employee and was put in his pocket.

Another news appeared on December 2, 1989 under the headline of *ULFAr Sangskar Karjyo* (*Reform Activities of ULFA*) where news pieces from three different areas of Assam were put together. The first news was from Golaghat which said that the members of United Liberation Front of Asom had destroyed fermented molasses worth six thousand rupees and other utensils used for making country liquor in 13 country liquor shops in the surrounding areas of Golaghat like Jogibari, Japihojiya, Selengi, Bogorijeng, Pulibor etc. According to this news the people of the area had welcomed the step of ULFA.

The second news was from Lakhimpur. It started with adulation of the ULFA and stated that the ULFA had succeeded at a task which the Police and the Excise department had failed at over the years. According to it, many illicit liquor shops had mushroomed in and around the Lakhimpur town which became the dens of drunkards with uncivilized behaviour. But due to efforts of the ULFA within a fortnight all these shops had vanished. The commotion created by the drunkards had also gone away and peace returned to the town of Lakhimpur. According to it crime had reduced in the town as the youth engaged in unscrupulous activities were made to kneel down at public places, sweep and clean bus stops, train stations and public toilets.

The third news was from Rangiya, where one Ananta Deka was made to kneel down in the Puthimari Chowk for a week. He was accused of printing fake pads and coupons in the name of the ULFA and collecting money. The correspondents did not fail to add that the people had expressed satisfaction over such activities of the ULFA.

In another incident three youths were made to kneel down in front of Anuradha Cinema, Guwahati on December 13, 1989 around 6.30 in the evening. They were accused of selling illicit liquor in the Bamunimoidam area. The news was presented like a real life drama by the correspondent of *Dainik Asom*. Interestingly, the non-interference of the police in an incident like this was referred to and mocked at by an eyewitness of this incident as reported by the correspondent.

On the evening of February 12, 1990, the Vice Principal of District Educational Training Centre, Mirza, Surendranath Rajkumar was
kidnapped by ‘unidentified’ miscreants. He was stripped, beaten and tied to the football goal post of Kamrup Vidyapith playground. The news appeared on February 14, 1990 in Dainik Asom. Later on, the ULFA owned up the responsibility for his punishment. He was accused by ULFA of misbehaving with the girls students of the Centre and for his drinking habits.

The news of the public humiliation of the ‘offenders’ kept pouring from all over the Brahmaputra Valley. But what is important to note is that while the ‘accused’ went on taking their punishments in the public places, the police and other people remained mute spectators. During this period many myths were created around the activities of ULFA and received legitimacy in the form of parallel structure of justice it devised.

3.5.2. Physical Violence Against the ‘Offenders’

The naked dead body of Prakash Satyarthi, a homeopathic doctor was found hanging from a tree near the bus stop of Narayanpur on September 9, 1989. The symbol of ULFA was hanging from his chest. This news appeared in Ajir Asom as Narayanpurot Dutta Hotyakando (Two Killings in Narayanpur). In a statement published later on, the ULFA owned up the crime. He was accused of supplying blue films, rape and misbehaving with women.

Khukan Pal, the owner of Shyama Textiles, was shot dead by ULFA on October 30, 1989 in his residence at Biswanath Chariali. He was accused of being involved in the smuggling of horns of Rhinoceros in Assam. The news appeared in Dainik Asom on 1 and November 2, 1989.

On November 18, 1989, the trunk-less head of Mohammed Jamaluddin Khan a former student of Darrang College was recovered from Kamarchuburi area of Tezpur. He was earlier kidnapped by the ULFA. Later, in a statement issued by the ‘commandant’ of the Sonitpur District, ULFA unit said the student was kidnapped and killed by the ULFA as he collected money in the name of the Front and was also involved in several incidents of rape. The news along with the photograph of the trunk-less head appeared in all the dailies of Assam at that time.

On the night of November 24, 1989, Ram Sagar Tiwari (50), a Telephone Inspector was shot dead by three armed youths at his residence at
Vijaynagar near Palsbari. He was arrested some months back by Palasbari police allegedly for supplying girls for immoral purposes. In a press release issued on November 25 by Hiren Pathak, Kamrup ‘District Commander’ of the ULFA claimed responsibility for the killing of Ram Prasad Tiwari. According to it, Tiwari was executed after being found guilty of trafficking girls besides several rape cases. The news appeared on November 27, 1989 in Dainik Asom.

A plea that appeared as news at the bottom of the left corner of the last page of Dainik Asom on May 22, 1990 epitomized the strength and clout of ULFA in Assam during that period. It came with the caption “Sanjukta Mukti Bahini, ULFA loi Nibedon” (Plea to United Liberation Front of Asom, ULFA). A verbatim translation of that news reads, “I, Md. Assad Ali, who in the eyes of ULFA committed the crime of rape taken place at Dimu-Dabaka, beg my life from ULFA. I promise to keep myself away from any form of such criminal activities in future. So, please give me the opportunity to serve you by lifting my death sentence as published in Purbanchal Prahari on 11.12.89 and in Sadin on 15.11. 89.” The fate of Md. Assad Ali is not known, but the news remains as the perfect example of ULFA’s legitimacy as the provider of justice in many places of Assam during that period.

There are many instances when the ‘criminals’ were given ‘capital punishments’ by the ULFA. Although most of the time the ULFA let the people know what allegations were leveled against the ‘accused’ after the execution, but by 1990 in many remote areas the ULFA started holding ‘people’s courts’ where accused were given punishments before the villagers. A surrendered ULFA militant of Lakhimpur district confided to the author that the ULFA kept jails where the ‘criminals’ were given primitive punishments. Before killing a ‘criminal’, punishments like smashing the teeth with the hammer, chopping of the ears and the noses were also common. In many cases the lower rung cadres took advantage of the situation and punished people for old personal enmities or family feuds.

3.5.3. Constructive Work of ULFA

On March 15, 1990, a small piece of news appeared in Dainik Asom, ULFAr Netritwot Mothauri Nirman (Embankment Built Under the Leadership of ULFA). According to it the embankment on the river of Kaldiya which was damaged by the previous year’s flood was built
under the leadership of the ULFA members from the Tihu area and with the cooperation of the local people.

On May 31, 1990, it was reported that under the guidance of Nityananda Anchalik Committee of ULFA around hundred workers built the embankment from Golaghat Bridge to Bisenkusi. It was also reported that the ULFA had undertaken the job of building an embankment for agricultural purposes at Haura village.

When the author visited Laluk of Lakhimpur District, the villagers showed the Laluk College, which was built under the supervision of ULFA during 1990s.

Although not extensively reported in the newspapers, the ULFA undertook projects of making the village roads, embankments on rivers, school buildings etc in almost every part of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. Sometimes this work was done under the supervision of Jatiyo Unnoyon Parishad, although the difference between Parishad and cultural wing of the ULFA was rather thin. The dynamics of these constructive activities are discussed in a separate chapter as gleaned from public memory.

3.5.4. All Pervading Influence of the ULFA

The influence of ULFA’s presence was all pervading in Assam during 1988 and 1990 (before the declaration of President’s rule) as is evident from the reading of the news that appeared mostly in the middle pages sent particularly by the local correspondents. Some news capsules are reproduced here to reflect the mood of the period.

The 56th annual conference of Asam Sahitya Sabha, the premier socio-cultural and literary organization of Assam was held at Biswanath Chariali from February 10, 1990. On February 11 in Dainik Asom, this news appeared at the front page as a lead story. As a part of this story, a small news item appeared as Sabhatholit ULFAr Prachir Patra (ULFA’s Wall Writings in the Venue). According to it, posters of ULFA were pasted all over the walls of the venue. These posters mentioned the purpose of the literature and in some posters the ULFA had urged to use it as a means of protest and struggle.

On February 26, 1990, a small news item appeared on page number five of Dainik Asom, titled Mukoli Sabhat ULFAr Bhaxon (ULFA’s Speech in the Open Meeting). According to it, at the 59th annual
Photograph of the banner that the ULFA had put in the campus of Barpeta Satra, a highly revered religious institution in Assam. The banner reads – “We had never been Indians and would never be Indians. We Assamese are always free. Equal right and equal respect to every community of Assam is our pledge.”

An armed group of the ULFA with sophisticated weapons.
Source: Ajir Asom, June 20, 1990.
ULFA’s banner on display in the youth festival held at Guwahati University. The banner impels the youth of Assam to break the shackles of servitude.

Source: Agradoot, January 21, 1990.

Two young men were made to kneel down in a public place by the ULFA cadres. They were accused of raising fund in the name of the ULFA.


A young man was made to kneel down at the busy Kolaigaon crossing by the ULFA cadres. He was accused of making fake currency notes and misbehaving with women.

Source: Ajir Asom, December 5, 1989.
conference of Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, a top official of the ULFA reflected upon the extraordinary organizing capacity the Guru (Srimanta Sankardev) and his priceless contribution in the field of art, literature and culture. A lucid interpretation of the Veda was also made by this top leader according to the report. The correspondent did not forget to mention that this top leader of the ULFA participated with one and half dozen body-guards in the full presence of the police force. It is worth mentioning that Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha is a religious body in Assam that propagates Vaisnavism founded by Sankardeva.

The Doul festival is an important festival of Barpeta celebrated at the time of Holi. The function takes place for four days. But in 1990 the celebration was little different as reported in Dainik Asom on April 3, 1990. At first, the report dwells on the successful completion of the festival. Then it said that one noticeable thing about that year’s Doul festival was that the unsavoury behaviour of the drunkards was not noticed due to the overwhelming presence of ULFA. Many banners of the district committee of ULFA were seen hanging around the Satra compound. Warnings were issued against the drunkards in some of these banners. In one or two other banners the message of its vow of establishing an independent Assam based on the equal rights of all the communities was conveyed. A picture of one of the banners with the symbol of ULFA was also published on top of this news.

It is a common ritual in Assam for the leaders of the political parties, student bodies and the journalist fraternity to visit the areas surrounding the Bangladesh border as the news of their visits often gives them the legitimacy to comment on problems of Assam. The ULFA was no exception in this regard. A news appeared on the last page of Dainik Asom on May 24, 1990 that the ULFA leaders had visited the neighbouring areas of Bangladesh border like Mancachar, Phulbari, Rajapara, Kukurkata, South Salmamara, Singarimari etc and took stock of the problems of the people of these areas. According to this news piece they also expressed their concern over the slow pace of the construction of the border roads.

3.6. ULFA’s Diktat to Media and Reactions

The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) had issued a notice on July 25, 1990 warning the Press and the audio-visual communication media not to publish any news in connection with the organization, without prior written permission from its Central Publicity Wing.
The violation of the directive would attract the death penalty, the notice cautioned. On July 27, 1990, the news appeared in *Dainik Asom* with the headline *Prasar Madhyamor Lokloi ULFAr Nirdex* (*ULFA’s Directive to Media*). According to it, the organization’s attention had been drawn to the misleading, twisted and exaggerated news about the organization, appearing in a section of the media giving rise to baseless criticism and questions. The notice was signed by Hiren Pathak, the Commander-in-Chief of the ULFA of Kamrup district and stated that such news were only serving the commercial purpose of the media houses. The extremist organization warned that violation of the directive by any journalist, interviewer, commentator or anyone connected with the news would be considered serious and such person would be treated as the enemy of the people of Assam and would be awarded the death penalty. The warning ULFA said would come into effect with the receipt of the statement. On July 28, in response to this a news appeared in *Dainik Asom* as *Monobhab Salani Koriboloi ULFAloi Ahban* (*Plea to the ULFA to Change its Mind*), appealing the ULFA to change its mind. This appeal was made by journalists from across the state. According to it, a meeting was held at the Press Club where more than hundred journalists participated apart from the editors of all the leading newspapers and journals. The meeting was presided over by veteran journalist Radhika Mohan Bhagwati. On July 29, it was reported that the eminent journalist of Orissa R.P. Shastri had condemned ULFA and appealed to the Prime Minister to provide security to the journalists in Assam. The headline was captioned as *ULFAr Nirdeshot Gabhir Udweg* (*Deep Concern over ULFA’s Diktat*). The Assam Journalists Association had also condemned the diktat of the ULFA. It was reported on the last page of *Dainik Asom* on July 30, with the headline *Sangbadikor Udweg* (*Journalists’ Concern*). On August 1 it was reported on page five of *Dainik Asom* under the headline *Asom Sampadak Sanmilan* (*Assam Editor’s Association*) that a discussion was held under the initiative of *Boodhbar*, the Assamese weekly where it was decided to form a committee of the editors called All Assam Editor’s Association to fight in unity against such undemocratic directives.

However the ULFA partially lifted the ban and declared it on August 10, 1990. It was reported in *Dainik Asom* on August 13 as ‘*Niropekkhyo’ Batori Paribexonot Nixedhagya Arop Kora Nai-ULFAr Bibritti* (*No Ban on ‘Objective’ Reporting-ULFA’s Statement*). According to it, the ULFA had clarified that it had not imposed any ban on the publication of any objective or relevant news item concerning the
organization, but prior permission had to be taken only for publication of analytical articles about the ULFA. A statement dated August 10, by the Central Publicity Secretary Siddhartha Phukan said that the organization regretted the misunderstanding created by the July 25 statement of the organization on the issue. Elaborating on the policy of the ULFA towards newspapers and magazines, Phukan said that the ULFA had observed that a section of the newspapers and magazines of the State had been indulging in a planned ‘counter revolutionary’ propaganda under the cover of dissemination of news. In the statement, the Publicity Secretary of the ULFA categorically accused the magazine *Sutradhar* of spreading canards against the organization in the name of journalism.

Moreover, Phukan said pessimistic observations of a section of intellectuals in their analytical writings about the ULFA were affecting the ‘revolutionary spirit’ of the people. He said that the primary obligation of the ULFA was towards ‘revolution’ and all democratic values would be guided by the ‘revolution’ only. So, he stressed that they would not allow the ‘revolution’ to be affected by ‘counter revolutionary propaganda’.

The publicity Secretary reiterated that all newspapers and magazines publishing news about ULFA should also publish statements and clarifications released by the organization. He said that the ULFA had some unhappy experience when clarifications against some misleading items were not published. For that, he took the example of *Ajir Asom* accused it of not publishing a clarification about some allegations made against the ULFA by the UTNLF in a May issue of the paper. Earlier, the statement while dwelling on its armed action against Rohiteswar Saikia and Dibrugarh SP Daulat Singh Negi, described them as “anti-Assamese” and “tyrannical”, respectively.

Interestingly, no strong criticism appeared in *Dainik Asom* against the ULFA for its attempted gag on the freedom of expression of the journalists of the state. Although, the ‘ban’ was partially lifted and many journalists, editors, columnists and commentators resisted the diktat of ULFA, it had an adverse effect on the local correspondents from the rural centres. They became rather cautious and put a stop to reporting on ‘not so important’ news like public humiliations of the offenders by the ULFA and even its public welfare activities. So, the diktat also marked the end of the reporting of ‘small’ but truly reflective incidents pertaining to the ULFA from the rural centres.
3.7. Conclusion

Robberies and attempted robberies in the banks form an important part of ULFA’s activities before it slowly established its influence in every sphere of public life in the Brahmaputra Valley. Not much sympathy was shown to the ‘robbers’ in the Vernacular Press in chronicling the events. Although newsspersons were aware of the existence of the ULFA and its objectives, still terms like ‘dacoits’ and ‘miscreants’ were used in the reporting. From ULFA’s point of view, the second (Namrup State Bank, 1986) was the only ‘successful’ robbery among these three major bank-robberies. But the news of this ‘successful’ robbery gets very negligible attention compared to the other two ‘unsuccessful’ robberies. The first ‘unsuccessful’ one committed in 1985 got the maximum coverage in the Vernacular Press. The simple reason may be that it was the first of its kind in Assam. But if we probe deeper, we find that this act of robbery was also an attempt of the radical extremist forces within the Assam movement to strengthen its hold when the movement leadership was holding informal talks with the Centre. After the election of 1983, the incumbent AASU leadership was slowly losing its grip and the extremist section had become quite active in many places of Assam. But the mainstream Assamese vernacular press was solidly behind the incumbent AASU leadership led by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and was in no mood to let the extremist section jeopardize the talks or to take the movement in a new direction. On the other hand, the ‘successful’ bank robbery of Namrup in 1986 was committed just after the AGP had assumed power and the mainstream vernacular press with its full support to the AGP did not want to highlight the breach of the law and order situation which in a way, would have reflected the failure of the government.

By way of assassinating the members of political parties, the ULFA made its extremism clear to the people of Assam. But it is interesting to see that there was no attack on the members of AGP (though there were serious charges of corruption and nepotism against many of its ministers). Instead there prevailed a relationship of bonhomie and mutual dependence among the leaders of AGP and the ULFA. The political rivals of AGP were usually targeted in this period. Like the political assassinations, the attack on the police personnel and their relatives helped the organization to establish its supremacy over security forces at that period in Assam. By way of attacking prominent businessmen and top officials of industries, the ULFA managed to extract
a huge amount of money for procurement of arms and ammunitions. Reports on these attacks were carried out in all Assamese dailies. *Dainik Asom* took a very partisan role and echoed the statements issued by Home Minister and usually put the blame for these killings on a circle of with vested interests (*nyosto swartha jorito mohol*) in order to sully the reputation of AGP ministry. *Ajir Asom’s* role was not so biased. The involvements of the ULFA were often mentioned in the acts of violence.

With the ULFA establishing a parallel administration by 1989, a campaign against social evils like the sale of country liquor, eve-teasing, gambling etc was also carried out. Quite often, the means of this campaign were threat and coercion. Fear was evoked among the people by way of punishing publicly a person or a group people involved with the ‘immoral’ activities. It must also be noted that the standard of morality was set and measured by the members of the organization. The news of public humiliations of bootleggers, gamblers and petty criminals were carried out with lot of enthusiasm in both *Dainik Asom* and *Ajir Asom* at that time. The pieces of news were often accompanied by photographs. But in this one sided representation of news, the stories of the victims of these acts of public humiliations remained untold. Questions like “Why a particular person was chosen to be punished?” or “Were the perpetrators morally better than the victims” were never probed in these reportings. The intolerant autocratic mindset of a section of its leadership was quite apparent in the fatwa issued against the media. Although it was partially lifted, the organization did not desist from attacking people publicly criticizing its activities.
IV
The Discussion and Criticism of the Activities of the ULFA

This chapter continues mapping the image of ULFA in Assamese vernacular press. But, it moves beyond the factual descriptions of events to the theoretical debates around the activities of the ULFA, the opposition it faced from the URMCA and the discovery of a much sordid face of it with the unearthing of 16 dead bodies from its deserted camps. The discovery of the mass graves marks the end of the benevolent super-hero image of the ULFA. There is an effort to map these events through the analysis of the texts in Assamese print media.

4.1. Discussions about the Activities of the ULFA

It seems that the activities of the ULFA as discussed in chapter three were part of a well devised strategy of the organization and through public statements, it often appropriated these actions as part of their ‘total social revolution’. These actions helped the organization to acquire a larger than life image attracting awe, admiration and fear of the people. Most of the established Assamese vernaculars of that period chose to keep a safe distance from the activities of the ULFA and preferred not to discuss or initiate a public debate on the activities of the organization. Yet, there were powerful voices against the organization’s activities particularly that of interfering in the private domains of people’s lives. Some of these pieces appeared in the Ajir Asom, Boodhbar, Prantik and Sutradhar. The editor of Boodhbar, Parag Kumar Das tried initiating a public discourse on the objectives and methodology of the ULFA. Although the paper lent its support to the ideology of the ULFA later on, it did not desist from criticizing its activities during that period. Sutradhar, the fortnightly, edited by Homen Borgohain also played a very important role in opening up a discussion on the activities of the ULFA. These discussions form a rich discourse and some of these pieces are picked up here to highlight the key arguments.

Hiren Gohain well known for his candidness and bold expression of ideas was one of the first Assamese intellectuals to comment upon the activities of the ULFA during 1989 and 1990. He made some of the very important observations on the activities of the ULFA and invoked
for the first time the “Robin Hood like image” of the organization. Most of his commentary appeared in his special column called “Praxangakrame” in Ajir Asom, where he wrote on various public issues. Some of his pertinent commentaries that appeared under the subheadings in that column were AASU, ULFA aru Nirbason Ityadi (AASU, ULFA and Election etc) on December 14, 1989, ULFA Bixoye Akou Ebar (Once again on the ULFA) on December 22, 1989, ULFA Bixoye Rotona aru Ghotona (Calumny against the ULFA and the Incident) on May 24, 1990, ULFA Bixoye Akou Ebar (Once again on the ULFA) on June 14, 1990, ULFA, AASU aru Onoxon (ULFA, AASU and Hunger Strike) on July 27, 1990, ULFA r Bhabuki aru Sangbadik (ULFA’s threat and the Journalists) on August 1, 1990 and Mrityudanda Makub Hol (Capital Punishment Lifted).

He discussed at length the activities of the ULFA and an effort is made here to provide a vignette of his detailed discussion to understand some basic issues. His criticism stemmed from the effort of the organization to reform the society from the top by adopting terror tactics. He admitted that corruption and injustice in the society often filled up his mind with bitterness and like others he was also tempted to support the strategy adopted by the ULFA. But, the consequence of the Assam movement when the visceral emotions got precedence over logical and reasonable thinking taught the people of Assam to think otherwise. He also criticized supercilious behaviour of some of ULFA’s cadres. According to him, instead of threatening people with arms, the organization should concentrate on organizing people against the social evils like drinking, gambling or lechery and averred that revolutionary changes in the society could be brought only through the spontaneous participation of the people.

He had collected his information on ULFA’s activities from his acquaintances and from the letters written to him by various people across the state. Gohain mentioned the words of admiration showered on the activities of the ULFA by some of his acquaintances from Lakhimpur. His acquaintances were of the opinion that the ULFA had done a lot of work quite useful to the society. They had given him the accounts how the ULFA had made young boys accused of eve-teasing to stand on the streets and prostrate before every passing girl, had made the gamblers to kneel down in the busy market places, had put a blanket ban on alcohol and had made the doctors who refused earlier to see patients without an advance of fifty rupees to see the patients with a
fee of just ten rupees. His acquaintances were happy that the ULFA had killed lechers, illegal poachers, opium traders and the people of that ilk. Commenting upon these changes brought in by the organization, he asserted that once the fear of the ULFA evaporates, the people would again engage in their anti-social activities. The result of the attempt to reform the society from the top, like Robin Hood or Pa Phu, would be rather shallow and short lived. He also expressed his doubts about the spontaneity of the people’s support. In this context, he chose to invoke the de-addiction drive launched by the Congress workers against mass opium addiction in Assam as a part of the freedom struggle. He recounted how the volunteers had pleaded with the opium addicted people and with constant efforts eradicated this social evil almost permanently.

Gohain quoted a letter written by a gentleman from Dhemaji, describing people’s experience with ULFA’s welfare activities like building embankments or construction of roads. According to the author of this letter, the local people were quite discontented about the way ULFA had carried out these activities. All the able people of his locality including doctors and administrative officers were served notices and taken away to construct a particular road; but to their chagrin nobody from the organization took part in the construction work. Rather the cadres on their motorcycles with guns hanging from their shoulders wandered around the working people inspecting their work. According to the composer of the letter, the behaviour of the cadres was akin to the contractors inspecting the work of the labourers employed by them. He also alleged that some cadres reprimanded the people for coming late for work or making a mistake. Although people were very unhappy, they kept silent out of fear. Taking a cue from this letter, Gohain cautioned the ULFA of the prospect of cutting itself away from the people caused by the arrogance and high-handedness of some its cadres. He also exhorted the organization not only to be driven by the ideology expressed in the famous quote of Mao, ‘power comes out of the barrel of a gun’, but also to remember the other famous quote of Marx, ‘the greatest revolutionary force is the revolutionary masses’.

The role of Sutradhar was mentioned by the ULFA as taking an ‘anti-ULFA stand’ in its diktat against the media. Two pertinent articles that appeared in Sutradhar would be discussed here. Prantik, the most popular fortnightly of Assam known for its ‘neutrality’ in the matters of politics also published commentaries on ULFA’s activities without
attracting the wrath from any section of the polarities. One commentary in Prantik that dealt with the activities of ULFA is discussed here.

In the issue of 1-15 January, 1990, Jiten Pathak wrote a satirical article titled “AGP-ULFA Bhâi Bhâi Sàbadhânir moron Nâi” (ULFA and AGP are Brothers, the Cautious Don’t Get Killed). The article launched a scathing attack on the corrupt AGP Government and questioned the bonhomie between the ULFA and the AGP. It also warned the AGP leaders of the serious consequences of this friendship and foretold that the barrel of the gun would surely be directed against them one day and that the people would never come forward to save them in their days of distress.

The article started in a lighter vein with a discussion on the similarities between the ULFA and the AGP leaders in their physiognomy. But, this had a deeper significance. As it also appears from the title of the article, the author subtly warned the people of Assam that characteristically there is not much difference between the corrupt AGP leaders and the ULFA leaders and given a chance the ULFA leaders would also engage in corruption and nepotism like the AGP leaders.

Then, it discussed how the people of Assam were deceived by the AGP ministers who had engaged in corruption, nepotism and high-handedness after assuming the power at the end of the Assam movement. The author, very satirically appeals to the Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta to give a definition of the ULFA for the benefit of the people of Assam. According to the author, the definition of the ULFA would dispel apprehensions of the simple citizens of Assam who had stopped coming out of their homes after dusk and the traders would be able to contribute voluntarily to the exchequer of the ULFA. This remark is important because the incumbent government led by the AGP was quite ambiguous in its dealing with ULFA. Although, it kept issuing statements of taking strong actions against the ‘miscreants’, in reality it allowed the ULFA to grow with its tacit support. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this passivity on the part of the AGP helped the Central Government to declare the President’s rule and to deploy Army in Assam.

After his attack on the Chief Minister, the writer criticized the Home Minister, Bhrigu Kumar Phukan for remaining a mute spectator to the activities of the ULFA. He expressed his surprise over the incidents of extortions and murders carried out in the broad daylight. According to
him, it was quite surprising that the police was not allowed to function properly and whenever the police had arrested someone, they turned out to be either members of AASU or ‘fake-ULFAs’ and were let off.

Then he criticizes ULFA and blames the organization for putting sophisticated deadly weapons in the hands of the new generation. It accused the ULFA of beckoning thousands of young boys and girls to tread on the dangerous path from which nobody has returned back (or returned changed completely). It also expressed the pangs of the author on finding young boys and girls with bright faces and healthy physiques frittering away their lives in the name of ULFA.

In conclusion, he refers to the abduction of Rubiya, who was kidnapped by the terrorists in Kashmir and her father the then Home Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed who had to bend before the demands of the terrorists. The author asks the Chief Minister to surmise a situation in future where he may be asked to step down by kidnapping one of his own little kids. It ends with the warning that very limited time was left.

Another important write-up by Debabrata Sarma titled *Ulfai Pakkhyo Posondo Korok!* (ULFA must choose its side!) was published in *Sutradhar* in the issue of 1-15 March, 1990. The author gave a theoretical criticism based on the activities of ULFA during that period. The context of this article derived from ULFA’s call to stop Hindi expansionism perpetrated by Indian bourgeoisie. According to the author he would have welcomed ULFA had this awakening stemmed from a desire to strengthen the local capital.

To describe the prevailing situation of that period, he brings in the simile of a rail engine moving ahead without the coaches and making records in the speed. According to him, the Assamese media was mesmerized by the bravado of the petit-bourgeois young revolutionaries who had kept the peasant-labourer proletariats out of their struggle. According to him, the formation of capital in Assam should have involved equal redistribution of land and industrialization. But the leaders of the Assam movement who assumed power had rather involved themselves in the corruption of permit, dealership and brokerage. Sarma questioned if this unproductive mindset of the Assamese culture had made the youths of that period dream of terminating the exploitation of the Indian capitalist in Assam with the help of the gun. It also warned the ULFA not to be trapped by the caste Hindu mindset of the Assam movement leadership. According to him,
the ULFA, which was so accustomed to using Marxist phrases, must understand that in the nationalist struggle the leadership has to come from the proletariat not from the Assamese bourgeois. So, he questioned the ULFA to whom they have assigned the task of the nationalist struggle: the proto bourgeois which has not developed yet in Assam or the petit-bourgeois.

He posed an important question about ULFA’s attitude towards two of the most important communities of Assam- the Jharkhandi tea garden labourers and the religious minorities living in the char areas. The Jharkhandi tea garden labourers were denied the schedule tribe status in Assam whereas the poor peasants from the char areas were denied their rights by being branded Bangladeshis by AASU and AGP. These two communities constituted almost half of the population of Assam and without their active support the ULFA nationalist struggle for freedom could not succeed. He asked the leaders of ULFA to clearly state their stance on these communities. Then he raised the question of the right to self-determination of the indigenous communities like the Tai-Ahoms, Moran-Muttoks, Chutiyas and Koch-Rajbanshi who were indispensable parts of Assamese social-life. He cautioned that the mere change of the seat of power from Delhi to Dispur would not solve the problem and the ULFA could not keep this issue aside casually by terming these movements as conspiracies incited by the anti-Assamese lobby. So, he made a clarion call to ULFA to choose its side: whether it would take the side of the oppressed downtrodden people of Assam or would remain mercenaries of Assamese bourgeois. According to him these questions were very important not only for the ULFA but also for the people of Assam. He expected that the voice of the people questioning the activities of ULFA would not be gagged, the way it was gagged in a fascist manner during the course of the Assam movement.

He also questioned the reform activities of ULFA and criticized the organisation of suffering from a sense of narcissism due to the praise bestowed on it by the friendly news-houses about its work.

His criticism stemmed from the fact ULFA did not punish the corrupt AGP ministers or the high ranking corrupt officials. Commenting on its programme of punishing Tom, Dick and Harry who sold country liquor, it questioned why ULFA had not touched the government and its excise department which earned in crores from the liquor industry.
It also accused ULFA of ignoring the diversity of Assam while enforcing a blanket ban on the use of alcohol. Wine is a part and parcel of the cultural life of many indigenous communities of Assam, who preserved their culture in spite of all odds. According to him, it is the Vaisnavite influenced middle class morality which traced liquor as the source for all evils. Using the example from China he showed that opium was used as a means of exploitation by the colonial forces and that social evil got eradicated only through a violent social struggle.

Then he discussed the image of ULFA as the guardian of women’s honour and criticized the ULFA for not putting an effort at awaking public consciousness against the harassment of women like eve teasing. The author asserted that the best resistance to the oppression of women was the conscious and united struggle of men and women. But he regretted that the ULFA, instead of organizing people against the harassment of women were busy showing the might of the gun.

In discussing about the corruption engulfing the state, he brought in the metaphor of a rotten fish. The way a fish rots from the head, the network of corruption in Assam started at the top level of the administration being executed by the nexus of the bureaucrats, the businessmen and the politicians and under this nexus the petty corruptions at the lower levels had grown. He appreciated ULFA for its action against corruption at the lower levels but expressed his surprise at its inaction to weed out corruption at the higher level. He brought in the examples of some of the well known scams like the Statefed and the potato seeds where the ULFA had not taken any steps against the perpetrators. He also articulated his astonishment at the silence of ULFA over incidents like the misbehaviour with the foreign female tourists by Utpal Dutta, the then minister from the AGP. He also asked why ULFA was soft towards the AGP MLA creating commotion at the Girls’ Hostel of the University in an inebriated state or the minister fabricating mark-sheets. In the article the author prognosticated that once the state oppression was steamrolled, the caste-Hindu Assamese middle class would desert ULFA.

It started with a quote from a newspaper that the very word ‘Ulfa’ spelled magic at that time in Assam and many of the youngsters boasted of having links with the ULFA. Then it traced the origin of ULFA to the failure of the national and the regional parties to weed out indiscipline, corruption, malpractices etc.

ULFA had claimed responsibility for many killings in the state that had taken place in the state. According to the sources of ULFA these people were involved in scams related to women, poaching Rhinos, other unlawful activities like drunken misbehaviour, bootlegging, misbehaving with women etc. It analyzed the incidents of punishments of ULFA and found logic in them. Two incidents of inaction on the part of the law enforcing agencies were quoted where ULFA had taken the task of punishing the perpetrators of the crimes. But it also questioned how far it is possible to weed out these social evils through armed means and how long would the Robin Hood like popularity of ULFA continue. Some of the complaints brought against ULFA through letters from the different places of Assam were discussed. In a letter written from Bokakhat it was alleged that some dishonest people had got into ULFA and created trouble for the people. Another letter from Kalabari complained that the cadres of ULFA were collecting money regularly from the teachers although teachers were paid very poorly in Assam. One’s attention was also drawn to the cases of scooter and motor cycles being taken away under duress by the uneducated and unmannered cadres of ULFA. A college student from North Lakhimpur wrote that the cadres of ULFA had shown insensitivity to the religious ethos of the Ahom community who uses wine in its rituals.

The article ended on a very positive note about the activities of ULFA. According to it there was no gainsaying the fact that ULFA had been able to attain a unique position in the Assamese society at that time by virtue of its reform activities.

4.2. ULFA–URMCA Conflict

United Reservation Movement Council of Assam (URMCA)\(^6^9\), an apex body of more than thirty seven Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), More Other Backward Classes (MOBC), Jharkhandi and some democratic organizations of the state\(^7^0\), had put a very stiff resistance to the ULFA at the grass roots level during the height of the ULFA’s activities in Assam. As Assam Police remained a mute spectator of the activities of ULFA in most places due
to AGP government’s tacit support to the organization, it was under the umbrella of URMCA that people resisted the high-handedness of ULFA cadres in many places. Armed with traditional weapons like bow and arrow, URMCA cadres challenged ULFA in many places of Assam. Terming the ULFA as representative organization of caste-Hindu Assamese, the URMCA questioned the ideology of the ULFA during that period. The URMCA had to pay the price for its opposition. Its leaders and the cadres were attacked, kidnapped and killed in many parts of Assam. Saurabh Bora, Amitabh Rabha, Akshyay Kalita, Mukul Bora, Ratikanta Das, Manik Das, Krishna Saikia, Bhuban Adhikari, Krishna Bahadur Raut Chetry, Premadhar Bora, Barki Tuti, Sukra Soren, Pabitra Das, Shyamal Bose and Dimbeswar Gogoi are some of the names of the URMCA organizers who had to lay their lives at the hands of the ULFA. This rivalry between the ULFA and the URMCA forms an important part of the political history of Assam during the ‘golden period’ of the ULFA (1988-90). The representation of this rivalry in the Vernacular media is important to understand the shift in the position of ULFA and its leadership in Assamese political history.

The press-conferences arranged by these two organizations remained the major sources from which the press reporters basically reported the conflict. No investigative reporting appeared on this issue. The conflict had reached its peak in the year 1990. On May 28, 1990, the news appeared with the headline *ULFA Biruddhe URMCA Abhijug* (*Allegations of URMCA against ULFA*). According to it, addressing a gathering at the Judge’s Field, the President of the meeting Sabyasashi Rabha accused the ULFA of unleashing a reign of terror in the State in order to bring the ruling AGP back into the power. The speaker dwelled on the issue of ULFA’s war on the country liquor and he questioned the non interference of the ULFA in case of the foreign liquor, while it had declared its war on the traditional liquor made by the ethnic communities of the state. He also accused the ULFA of turning a blind eye to the growing menace of drugs in the state. It was reported that there was a session of open discussion on the activities of the ULFA at that meeting and some of its actions were severely criticized.

Another similar headline appeared in *Dainik Asom* with the same wordings *ULFA Biruddhe URMCA Abhijug* (*Allegations of URMCA against ULFA*) on June 3 1990. In a Press Conference the General Secretary of the URMCA, Ranoj Kumar Pegu accused the ULFA of recruiting youths with the lure of Hero Honda motorcycle and pistol.
He also averred that the ULFA was not a revolutionary organization and the URMCA would fight against its terror tactics.

On July 2, 1990, the URMCA addressed yet another press meet. The news appeared on July 3 in Dainik Asom under the heading URMCAi ULFAr Sposto Byakhyia Bisarise (URMCA seeks explanation from ULFA). In this press meet, the URMCA leaders had asked the ULFA to release four of its kidnapped leaders namely Malidhar Deuri, Nabajang Gurung, Hiralal Pradhan and Sanjay Sharma. The URMCA leaders also accused the ULFA cadres of taking away two girls by force and making them member of the ULFA. The URMCA leaders also alleged that the same set of people from AGP, AASU and Jatiya Unnayan Parishad were acting in the name of the ULFA and the people of Lakhimpur district were suffering from a sense of insecurity.

On November 11, the General Secretary of the URMCA called a news conference where he told that they had declared war against the terror of the ULFA and would work with a ‘do or die’ attitude. He accused the ULFA of selectively killing the probable candidates of the URMCA to help the AGP and accused that the former was functioning like a mafia group. The news of this press conference appeared on the last page of Dainik Asom under the heading ULFAr Biruddhe URMCAr Abhijug: Juddha Ghoxana(URMCA’s allegation against ULFA: War declared).

To counter the allegations of the URMCA, the ULFA took a team of journalists to the remote villages of Lakhimpur district and arranged press-meet in one of the villages. The journalist reported their experience after their return and on June 21, 1990 the report appeared under the heading of URMCAr Biruddhe ULFAr Abhijug( ULFA’s allegations against URMCA) in Dainik Asom. The journalist gave the description of the villages where he witnessed the writings like “ULFA’s entry prohibited”, “ULFA and Strangers’ Entry Prohibited”. Explaining the reason for this, the Chairman of the Northern Region Rudrajit Deodhai Phukan said that this was part of the conspiracy to divide the communities on ethnic and religious lines by the URMCA.

The ‘Central Publicity Secretary’ of the ULFA Siddhartha Phukan accused the URMCA of preparing for the elections, in spite of its tall claim of being revolutionary. He also accused the organization of keeping itself busy in propaganda against the ULFA. The Central Publicity Secretary of the ULFA also alleged that the role of the Home
Department could not be overruled in the antagonistic attitude of the URMCA. According to him the then Home Minister of the Central Government had a secret meeting with the leaders of Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), All Bodo Student’s Union (ABSU) and the URMCA. Although the leaders of ASDC and ABSU were not willing to tow the line of the Home Ministry, the URMCA president Ranoj Pegu was rather too happy to follow the instructions from the Home Department. He also accused Ranoj Pegu of using the Mising community as a vote bank. According to him the URMCA wanted a conflict with the ULFA in Lakhimpur district. The ULFA was avoiding such open conflict in the interest of the common people. They also claimed that they were maintaining restraint to the highest degree to avoid conflict. He also denied the allegations brought against the ULFA that they had kidnapped the cadres of the URMCA.

Two of the girls who had ‘voluntarily’ joined the ULFA were brought before the journalists. They were Daivaki Pegu of Bangalmara and Vaijainti Deuri of Likhakchapor. It was alleged by the URMCA that these two girls were kidnapped by the ULFA and forcefully inducted into the organization. But the girls admitted before the journalists that they had joined the ULFA voluntarily. The General Secretary of Lakhimpur District Anirban Hazarika took them to many remote villages and gave a graphic description of URMCA cadre’s torture of ULFA supporters.

During their conversation, the ULFA leaders also criticized the basic ideology of the URMCA and expressed their view that reservation policy must be followed only with economic depravity as its yardstick. In their opinion, unlike Bihar, oppression in Assam does not follow a caste line and they termed the URMCA as a reactionary organization.

4.3. President’s Rule, Deployment of Army and the Discovery of the Mass Grave

The Centre placed Assam under the President’s Rule and declared the whole state as disturbed area by a Presidential Notification issued on the night of November 27, 1990. The state assembly whose term would have expired one month later was kept in suspended animation. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) were declared as unlawful associations. The Army operation was named Operation Bajrang. It is widely acknowledged now that the ULFA got the wind of the Army operation,
deserted their camps and took refuge in safer places. Operation Bajrang was highly unsuccessful and only the common people had to bear the brunt of the atrocities perpetrated by the Indian Army. This decision on the part of the Government gave a new direction to the politics of Assam. It also marked the end of the first phase of the activities of ULFA. The ULFA operated almost unopposed and un-checked before the declaration of the President’s rule and was not among the banned organization before November 28, 1990 in spite of its avowed aim of a ‘sovereign independent Assam’. The news was unexpected and came as a shock to the people of Assam.

The *Dainik Asom* dedicated its first page completely to the various aspects of this unexpected news on the November 29, 1990. The paper criticized the President’s rule officially in its editorial “*Asomor Khyetrot Dillir Siddhanta*” (*Delhi’s Decision on Assam*). According to it, the decision to impose the President’s rule was unjust and undemocratic. It also published the opinions of the political parties and prominent citizens regarding the imposition of the President’s rule. The atrocities committed by the army in the different places of Assam were reported in the pages of the daily and in the editorial of December 1, 1990, the paper appealed for an end to the excesses committed by the Army on the innocent people. In the editorial of 3rd December, the paper criticized the secrecy with which the President’s rule was imposed in Assam.

What was noticeable here was that the imposition of the President’s rule and the deployment of the Army to control the law and order situation of Assam also marked a shift in the reporting of Assamese newspapers. With the increasing atrocities on the common people during the period of the Army operation, the local news started getting more prominence than the national and the international news.

After the operation, many ups and downs came in the fortune of ULFA but what strikes one is that the news of the ULFA-related insurgency started occupying the centre stage in the vernacular newspapers of Assam.

During the operation, the army recovered 16 highly decomposed bodies from the ‘mass graves’ at the Lakhipathar camp of ULFA near Digboi. Some of the bodies were blindfolded while others had their hands tied. These dead bodies bore the testimony of the cruelty with which the ULFA punished the people it held guilty. The news of this important facet of the activities of ULFA appeared on December 5, 1990 in *Dainik*
Asom under the caption “Lakhipatharot Puti Thuwa Pundhorota Mritodeh Uddhar” (Fifteen dead bodies exhumed at Lakhipathar). According to it, the adviser to the State Governor, P. P. Srivastav, briefed the newpapers that the army had dug out 15 dead bodies at Lakhhipathar camp of ULFA and the recovery of more such bodies could not be ruled out. The follow up of this news on December 6 got mixed up with the other reporting from Lakhhipathar. It was reported how the relatives of the missing people had assembled there to find information about their near and dear ones. According to the report, the relatives and the friends of the missing people had come to the camps to identify the bodies. The correspondent described the plight of the people whom he met including Nandeswar Gogoi, the brother of Dimbeswar Gogoi, a Tai Ahom student activist of Rahan Pathar near Sapekhati, Halima Begum, the wife of G. Ahmed who was CID inspector in Digboi Police Station, Krishna Pal from Margherita whose brother was kidnapped. It also said that the forensic expert had confirmed that the bodies were tied with nylon rope and were buried two-three months back. The staff reporter reported that three dead bodies of namely Rana Goswami, Radhesyam Lahoti and Debu Chowdhuri were identified. According to it the army had also recovered the bodies of Bipin Gogoi and Gambhir Gogoi from Saraipung Reserve Forest.

Interestingly no editorial appeared in Dainik Asom exclusively to condemn the barbarity of the insurgent group. The editorial titled “Byobostha Louk” (Take actions) that appeared on December 12, seven days after the reporting of this act of cruelty, started with the sentence that the act of murder is condemnable irrespective of its purpose. It quoted Mahatma Gandhi that the means taken must also be honest, to achieve an honest goal and averred that the same thing could be said about the dead-bodies recovered at Lakhhipathar. The reasons given in favour of the killings by rejecting the law of the country would not be accepted by any civilized citizen, the editorial reasoned and said that another aspect of ULFA had come to the fore. In the second and the third paragraph the editorial went on to condemn the killings that had taken place and the prevailing situation of terror after the declaration of the President’s rule. It appealed to the government agencies to give publicity to the different clauses of Armed Forces Special Power Act, so that the innocent people did not get killed or injured. The last paragraph of the editorial dealt with the utter lack of trust of the Indian army on the civil administration and the consequent incidents of torture and the punishment of the innocent people and the horrible acts of
rape. It ended with the prognostication that the lack of co-ordination between the civil administration and the armed forced would make the situation of Assam more complicated. Although, apparently the dastardly act of ULFA was condemned in the first paragraph, the validity of the charges brought by ULFA against the people whose dead bodies were dug out from the ‘mass grave’ was not questioned. The goal was acclaimed as honest but only the means were criticized. Later it was revealed that among the people killed were leaders like Dimbeswar Gogoi who were political opponents of the ULFA.

4.4. Conclusion

There was discussion and criticism of the activities of the ULFA from a handful of columnists. The organization was criticized severely for its effort to reform the society by threat and by invoking fear. Interestingly, Hiren Gohain invoked the imagery of ‘Robin Hood’ or ‘Pa Phu’ to describe the reform activities of the ULFA and rejected revolutionary credentials of these activities. The ULFA-URMCA conflict laid bare the general resentment of a section of people against the activities of the ULFA. The symbols like traditional rice beer was invoked by the URMCA to show the caste Hindu middle class morality of the cadres of ULFA. The press conferences of the URMCA were well reported in the Vernacular Press. The ULFA on the other hand accused the URMCA of being reactionary and acting at the behest of Home Department of India. It is also important to note ULFA’s denial of caste based disparity in Assam. The novel attempt of ULFA of taking a team of journalists to visit Lakhimpur district where the ULFA – URMCA conflict was at its peak and holding a press conference in one of its camps was also well reported in the vernacular press. The declaration of President’s rule and deployment of army in Assam was widely condemned by the journalist. The discovery of sixteen tortured dead bodies in the infamous ‘mass grave’ although reported across the newspapers, was not condemned by the press.
V
The Early Welfare Activities of the ULFA:
A Case Study

The introductory chapter included a discussion on a perceived ‘Robin Hood-like-image’ of the ULFA and mentioned that one of the important ingredients of this image was its attempted welfare activities in the rural and the semi-rural areas of the Brahmaputra Valley. The ULFA managed to garner huge popularity by virtue of its activities like community farming, building embankments, mending village roads, constructing school and college buildings etc. While looking through the representations of the different activities of the ULFA in the print media during 1985-90, it was felt that a field-based understanding of its public welfare activities during that period be documented (as the people remember it now). The reasoning comes precisely from the fact that although these activities did not make headlines in the front pages of the newspapers or in the magazines, in reality, these works had helped the ULFA in putting up a parallel administrative structure in the rural and the semi rural areas of the Brahmaputra Valley, particularly during 1989-90. In order to understand how such work was accomplished at the rural centres, one case study is undertaken – the project to change the course of the river Dikrong near Bihpuria town in Lakhimpur district of the Upper Assam. This project was initiated by the ULFA to save the flood affected villages from continuous soil erosion. Although there are numerous examples of such public welfare projects in the Brahmaputra Valley undertaken by the people (encouraged, supported and supervised by the ULFA), this project was selected as a case study for numerous reasons. First, it was one of the successful projects of the ULFA at that time as remembered by the surrendered militants and the civilians of that area. Secondly, the Lakhimpur district was not only one of the strongholds of the ULFA during 1985-90 but had also received a lot of resistance from the people at the grassroots under the banner of the URMCA. Thirdly, a substantial portion of the workers participating in this project were from the communities whose mother tongues were other than Assamese like Mising, Nepali, Bengali etc.71

As there are no written accounts of this important work, a series of interviews were conducted with the people directly or indirectly
involved with the project and with the villagers affected by this work. A somewhat hazy picture of the whole exercise emerged from the loose memory narratives of the people. The description of the river and the problem of flood and erosion had been collected from two government departments - the Department of Flood Control and the Circle office of Bihpuria. The names of the people who were involved with the project who were interviewed are withheld to protect their identities. Many important aspects of this important work embodying the mood of the period are yet to be explored and what is presented here is a modest attempt to explore the implications of an event that exemplifies an important aspect of the early period of insurgency in Assam.

5.1. The River

The river Dikrong is one of the major north bank tributaries of the Brahmaputra, which originates near the border of Lower Subansiri district and East Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. A number of rivulets join river Dikrong on its left and right banks before it outfalls into the Brahmaputra in Assam. The total length of the river Dikrong is 145 km. The Dikrong flows through the hilly region of Arunachal Pradesh for a distance of about 113 km and in the remaining 32 km flows through the plains of Assam. In the upper reach of Arunachal Pradesh this river is known as Par Nadi and its tributaries are namely Keyate, Pang Nala, Shu Pabung, Peti Nala, Ranchi Pabung and Pachin Nadi. The tributaries of Dikrong at the plains areas are Beguli Nadi and Kachikata Nadi.

5.2. The Flood and Erosion Problem

The river Dikrong is of shallow depth and comparatively wide in cross section. It carries enormous quantity of silt load from its upper catchments areas and deposits the same in the river bed in the plains. Due to this behaviour of the river, it oscillates from one bank to the other resulting in formation of shoals at one bank and erosion on the opposite bank. The river Dikrong inundates a huge area during the rainy season causing flood and erosion. Bihpuria revenue circle has a large number of villages estimated to be no more than 65-70 which were identified to be chronically flood affected areas. Flood in this sub-basin is a regular annual phenomenon which causes inundation to vast areas on both banks and as a result cultivable lands and human dwellings of these areas get adversely affected. As such to protect the flood prone areas, embankments were constructed along both banks of Dikrong. Although these embankments have rendered reasonable
protection to the flood affected areas, however the effectiveness is decreasing due to the rising of the river bed gradually.

5.3. The Immediate Problem

The river Dikrong flows in an extremely meandering zigzag course and it has been observed by the geographers that the river has the tendency of migrating to the east. It has changed its course so much that earlier the river used to flow near Narayanpur more than 25 kilometers westwards from the present course, where one can still find the old abandoned course known as Mori Dikrong. This tendency of changing the course of the river has made the existence of many villages (particularly of those falling in the plains) very precarious. The other important aspect is that the meanders get wider every year till it reaches a saturation point after which the course gets straighter. By late eighties this changing course of the river and its ever increasing meanders had created an alarming situation to the existence of many villages in Bihpuria and Narayanpur revenue circles. Even there was a threat to the existence of Bihpuria town.

5.4. The Envisaged Project

In spite of putting the best effort, no written document of the envisaged project was found. It seems most of the documents were damaged by the people closely associated with it in the face of the increasing atrocities of the security forces in the aftermath of the Operation Bajrang. So, the oral accounts of the people are taken to reconstruct the event. As it appears from the narratives, the original plan of the project was to make a straight tunnel between the two ends of one meander of the river which takes its turn near the villages of Dangibil, Kenyamora, Sonari Gaon, Jokai Peluwa and Rajabari and which was around 2 kilometers long. The envisaged result was to make the tortuous stretch of the river into a straight stretch. The idea was rather two fold: to release hectares of cultivable land and to save the erosion of the river. Most importantly, the possibility of the meander getting wider would be subverted, thereby bringing immediate relief to existence of around twenty villages. According to M. Taher, a noted geographer, the project was well conceived and that he was quite well aware of it. Dulal Goswami, who worked extensively on the river system of Assam also, had a similar opinion. According to him the original plan was not unscientific. But both are not quite sure whether the people directing the work had the requisite knowledge.
5.5. The Mobilization of the People

Although the ULFA was not a banned organization till that time, most of its public welfare projects were executed under the banner of *Jatiya Unnayan Parishad*. Although, *Parishad* is usually branded as a frontal over-ground organization of the ULFA during that period, many associated with it refute this claim and affirm that it is wrong to simplify *Parishad* as the over-ground organization of the underground militants. *Jatiya Unnayan Parishad* was just a non-political socio-cultural organization floated by the sympathizers of the ULFA having its branches all over Assam. The people who had social standing were usually inducted into the organization locally as a part of its strategy. According to the former General Secretary of *Jatiya Unnayan Parishad* of Lakhimpur district, it was easier to involve the people with social recognition in the name of *Jatiya Unnayan Parishad* as it was a non-political organization formed with the basic objective of inculcating self-reliance among the Assamese people. Apparently, the dynamics was very simple- the ULFA cadres under the banner of *Jatiya Unnayan Parishad* inspired the villagers to offer physical labour called ‘Sramdaan’ and work got done by virtue of community participation.

In the particular case of Dikrong river it is important to investigate how the people were mobilized to participate in the work. This narrative is collected from one of the popular personalities of Bihpuria area who is associated and who took a very important part in that work during that time:

After the devastating flood of 1989, there was a consensus among the villagers that some preventive measures must come from the people before the next rainy season as no such effort was coming from the government. But nobody was sure of what action to be taken and how to mobilize the people. Just after the winter, some youths from the Central Committee of Jatiya Unnoyan Parishad came to Bihpuria to strengthen their organization. As there was an overwhelming enthusiasm created by Parishad in the whole of Assam, it was decided by some of the industrious youth that the people would be mobilized to prevent the destruction of the river under the banner of Parishad. Accordingly they met the concerned citizens and conducted meetings in the namghars of the villages. In no time, they received overwhelming support from the people across the villages. A representative meeting was called at Juga Baruah Hall, in Bihpuria town. More than one thousand people gathered
in that meeting and an overwhelming euphoria was created among the people. In the meantime, some youths visited and collected information from the offices of Irrigation and Flood Control. It was found out that the Flood Control Department had given a proposal to the government but due to the paucity of funds that proposal was not pursued by the department. Then they met the engineers of the department and came to know from them that the character of the river is to keep changing its course. According to the proposal of the department of Flood Control, a channel could be dug joining two meanders to change the course. The entire work would require one lakh forty thousand working hours. So, it was calculated and found that if they gather two thousand workers and if every worker works for seven hours daily, the work can be finished within 10 days. Accordingly, the call was given for the participation of at least one male member from each household and the enthusiastic villagers just thronged the site of the work with implements like kur and belcha to dig that channel.

5.6. The Work

According to all major accounts, the project was flagged off by the serving SDC at that time and the people participated in great numbers. Regarding the number of the people participating in the project, the figures vary from account to account. There were more than twenty thousand people, according to the villagers who participated. But according to the organizers, it was never more than five thousand and by the last days of the work, not more than one thousand people were there to work. According to the organizers, the work continued for around fifteen days although nobody was sure of the days as well. Everyday people were brought in trucks from all across the villages and Bihpuria town and the digging site was transformed into a great public fair. Although, lot of people gathered to participate in this work, very few of them were skilled for the work. The skilled labourers constituted of Nepali, Mising and Bengali speaking villagers as well as the Assamese speaking villagers who belonged to the traditional fishing community. As the people had to stay the whole day, light lunch had to be arranged. In the first few days, soaked Gram (boot mah) was served. But upon the suggestion of a Bengali gentleman it was replaced by khichiri. According to the organizers the work continued for around fifteen days (although nobody was sure of the number of days as well),
amid great enthusiasm and fun. Although the early 1990 was the time when the project was undertaken the exact dates of peoples’ participation could not be established. According to one important organizer, the work was not completed and the people stopped their work before the Bohag Bihu (which falls in the mid-April). Only one stretch was left between the new tunnel made by the people and the channel in which the river was flowing. But after the Bohag Bihu the spirit was dampened by many canards spread against the organizers and the main skilled labourers from the communities mentioned above refused to cooperate. So, ultimately some seven to ten people including the narrator braved the task of opening the stretch between the man made and the natural cannels with long bamboos and according to their expectations, the water started flowing through the new channel. So, from the present account of the organizers, it seems that the whole exercise took place under the initiative of the people and the involvement of the ULFA was marginal.

5.7. The Other Side of the Story

The ‘truth’ that appears from the above narrative is just one-sided. The high-handedness of the lower-rung ULFA cadres, un-accounted collection of fund, mandatory participation of the people etc are some of the allegations that emerge from the people’s narratives of that area. According to one narrator who had just passed his graduation from a reputed college of Guwahati, it was rather astounding to see what was going on in the name of public work:

As every male member had to go to work, I also went to participate in that work. But I was shocked to find that childhood friend who was school dropout and did not study till class six was instructing the respectable people of the villages. From his AK-47, which he was carrying all the time I knew he had joined the organization. The ULFA cadres were roaming with sophisticated weapons in the site and this had created panic among the simple villagers. The people participated not out of love but out of fear.

Although accepting that the work was done out of duress, there are many who still take extreme pleasure in how everybody was made to do menial jobs:

“It was sight to watch how the local police went with Kur and belcha to work in the site. The well-known Marwari traders of the locality
who might have never moved away from their ‘gaddis’ (sofas) were made to dig earth and carry sand on the top of their head. All of us were delighted and could not stop appreciating the boys.”

But what gave the project a bad name was the collection of a huge amount of unaccounted food items and cash. Rice, *daal*, grams, salts, sugar, tea etc were also collected from the traders in the name of feeding the working people. A trader (on terms of anonymity) told the investigator:

> We still pay the militant organization, but after the army operations the militant organization has developed a well devised network through which we have to pay, but in those early days there was a great chaos. We did not know who was real, who was not so real and who was a fake ULFA cadre. Although that was a public work done by the people, everybody knew who was behind them. So, we immediately donated cash and groceries whenever the demand was put on us. Lakhs of rupees were collected from us in the name of helping the people who were engaged in the digging work. But we saw little utilization of that collected fund.

One of the organizers admitted of financial anomalies. According to him, due to sudden announcement of Operation Bajrang, the financial anomalies could not be properly investigated and made public.

**5.8. The Presence of ULFA’s Top Leaders**

A prominent contractor from the Nepali community, who took an active part in this project remembered having an evening stroll through the sands of Dikrang river along with the ‘Chairman’ of ULFA Arabinda Rajkhowa and the selected organizers of this project. Another school teacher told the investigator about the easy manners of Bhimkanta Buragohain, the Adviser of the ULFA. The leaders were usually well guarded by their bodyguards with sophisticated weapons. But both the narrators felt that the people were not afraid of the ULFA leaders as they were very friendly with the people. The presence of these two central leaders was confirmed by other people also.

**5.9. The Opposition**

Soon after the project was started, it faced resistance from the people. The highhandedness of some cadres of the ULFA, and the over-
enthusiasm of some other youths of Jatiya Unnayan Parishad had angered many villagers. The other important activity of the ULFA that is the ban on country liquor which got transcended into a ban on traditional liquor of the ethnic communities had already angered communities like Rabha, Mising, Tai- Ahom etc. Moreover, the ULFA at that time was looked at as a representative of the values of caste Hindu Assamese middle class. So, many communities had rallied behind the URMCA to put up resistance against the ULFA at the grassroots. In Bihpuria also the URMCA in parallel were organizing the people against the ULFA in many strategically important villages when the work of the project was going on. The URMCA in Bihpuria town was led by a former charismatic AASU leader. In the interview he told the investigator that his reasons of opposition to the project were the autocratic functioning of the organizers, the corrupt nature of the people associated with the project, unscientific planning etc. Whatever it was the URMCA successfully resisted the project and as suggested one key person of the project, the skilled workers did not turn up to resume the work after Bihu.

5.10. Women’s Participation

In the work, women also participated in great numbers and had to take the responsibilities like washing rice and daal, cutting vegetables etc for the preparation of khichiri and sabji. Before khichiri was introduced as the mid-day meal, women had to clean and serve the gram seed (boot mah). A lecturer in her early thirties now who works in a college of Lakhimpur remembers the events:

I was a student of Lohit Dikrong High School at that time. Probably I was in class ten. We went to site of the work in traditional mekhela chadar. I helped in cutting vegetables for the making of khichiri. I was very scared at that time. I remember one lady cadre of ULFA who was carrying an AK-47. She was supervising our work...

An old lady from a well to do family who is in her late sixties recalls her participation: I went to the site only once. I helped in cutting vegetables for the preparation of khichiri. I did not like working there. People working there were quite scared. The ULFA boys inspected the work with arms in their hands. But they did not participate in the manual work. It was like a big mela...
The narratives reveal that the traditional role of the women was reinforced in this act of change.

5.11. The Result of the Project

It is very difficult to ascertain the success of this project as the river has changed its course several times after this project was undertaken by the people under the leadership of the ULFA. The image of the ULFA has also undergone sea change over the years. But there is no doubt that water indeed flowed through the man-made channel, but as revealed by the villagers within a few years the river came back to its original course and now it is flowing further eastward. The organizers believe that this project had saved large number of villages from the immediate danger of erosion. According to them had the government pursued the work, it would have led to permanent solution of flood and erosion in that area. Many villagers still admire the ULFA for organizing the people to find out solutions for their own problem. So, although tarnished a lot by the over-enthusiasm and corruption of the lower rung cadres, the ULFA could manage to unite the villagers to do work which was beneficial for their community.

5.12. Conclusion

It is quite a daunting task to build up a narrative based only on oral accounts and it is but natural that many important facts might have remained untouched. From the accounts, it appeared that ULFA carried out this project under the banner of Jatiya Unnayan Parishad. But many a times, the distinction between these two organizations got blurred. The administration was well aware of the project and some of its functionaries had participated or were made to participate in it. A section of the people resented the autocratic and high-handed behaviour of the ULFA and Parishad members and some of them organized themselves under the banner of URMCA and openly defied ULFA’s diktat. There prevailed a situation of great enthusiasm and confusion. Some unscrupulous people took advantage of the confusion and collected a huge amount of money from different businessmen and traders. Women were assigned with no major roles and their help was sought in the preparation of food. The organizers claim that the project was successful and yielded the desired result and saved many villages from getting submerged under Dikrong river. The river has changed its course many a times and there is no trace of the tunnel through which the course of the river was changed.
VI
Conclusion

Can a Robin Hood like image be attributed to the ULFA in its early period? This study started with an intricate question and to answer this query, discussed basically two dynamics: the representations of its activities in the selected Assamese vernacular press and the samples drawn from the people’s narratives explicating how they were affected by its activities. The introduction, also elaborated the diverse texts, stories and interpretations of the Robin Hood myth. This section discusses the rationale behind invoking the imagery of Robin Hood, and draws conclusions on the basis of the two dynamics mentioned above.

In the common perception, Robin Hood embodies type of noble hero who resists unjust authority, fights against the tyranny and stands behind the poor, women and the helpless. He is popularized as one who robs the rich and distributes among the poor. As no real original Robin Hood has ever been identified beyond dispute, it is the symbol of that legend that becomes all the more pertinent.

The introductory chapter, discussed Hobsbawm’s classification of Robin Hood as the noble hero and all the nine characteristics attributed by him to the activities of the outlaw. He also categorically makes the distinction between the noble robber (Robin Hood) and the modern guerrilla revolutionaries. According to him, the noble bandit of the earlier period operated as the leader of a very small band in a limited territory and organizationally and ideologically was too archaic to be classified as a revolutionary or a harbinger of a revolution, although he might join revolution for the sake of his people. The protest of Robin Hood is not directed against the general social system of oppression which spawns poverty but only against the injustice perpetrated by the corrupt representatives of the system. So, as a symbol also if we accept the interpretation of Robin Hood by Hobsbawm in which Robin Hood, the ‘noble hero’ is situated in his description of social banditry, we run the risk of oversimplifying the early activities of the ULFA as a ‘primitive rebellion’. But at the same time there was a clear disjuncture in ULFA’s early activities in the rural areas and its preaching on social revolution. So, although we may not be able to take into account all
the representative features of the noble bandit Robin Hood, we may yet find many of these features pertinent in the discussion of the modern day insurgency. Again, we can not gainsay the fact that Robin Hood is a champion of freedom and a rebel against an unjust social system and that the ULFA also represents these twin features in its theoretical ideology (even if not in practice according to its critics). The ULFA ran a parallel administration particularly during 1989 and 1990 in most rural areas of Assam and that parallel structure invokes a strong romantic association with the outlaws and the justice delivered by them.

Essentially, Robin Hood represents the poor man’s dream of establishing justice in an unjust world. The legend not only tells the outlawry of Robin Hood and his Merry Men, but quintessentially also represents the exploitation by the lords, barons and the abbots. Many people although not supporting its means, hail the ULFA for legitimately putting the misgivings of the Assamese people against economic exploitation of the state by the Union Government, tea garden owners, oil companies, corrupt officials etc. This imagery also captures the people’s fascination with the rebel who takes up arms against the existing social system. A common complaint one hears so often is, “earlier the activities of the ULFA were very good, but later on, its terror tactics have given it a bad name”. Although idealizing the past is a common human trait, there also stands out the fact that the earlier activities of the ULFA were markedly different from the overall terror tactics adopted by the organization in the recent past. A highly romanticized super hero image of the ULFA is still afresh in people’s memories. The term “Robin Hood image” is used essentially to catch that halo of romantic super-heroism associated with the organization.

Now, let us look back at the activities of the ULFA and see how it bolstered its larger than life image in the early period and which thereby helped it attain its legitimacy as an alternative to the existing socio-political system.

The bank robberies had streaks of heroism and the spirits of adventure. Although its cadres got caught on two occasions, the media reports made it clear that they were not simple robbers. The organization had also been able to get its message across to the people that some radical youths had taken up arms and were getting ready to challenge the State. The assassination of the leaders of the political parties made its extremism clear to the people. The attacks on the police officers and
their kin on the other hand helped it to establish its dominance over the law enforcing agencies in Assam and virtually led to the collapse of policing in the state. But at this point, one must refer to the ruthless killing of the wife of A. K. Mallik, the then Superintendent of Police on 10th September 1989. It should also be remembered that her two children had a miraculous escape during the attack. Neither was the brutal act condemned in strong terms in the Assamese vernacular press nor did the ULFA issue a statement tendering an apology for killing an innocent woman whose only palpable fault was that she was the wife of a police officer. It seems that the mandarins of the Assamese print media at that time did not understand the full implications of this act of utter intolerance. But with the progress of time, this intolerant and unapologetic mindset of the ULFA became more apparent to the people and now has its full reflection in the acts of terror like planting bombs in public places. It appears that there was always a question mark about a benevolent superhero image of the ULFA, even during its heydays.

The attack on the industries and business establishments had helped the ULFA in its extortion drive and huge sums of money were collected from the businessmen, the tea companies and the government servants of Assam. According to a top leader (now surrendered) a large chunk was used for the procurement of arms and ammunitions and in the training of the cadres at the NSCN, PLA and KIA camps. Very few instances of that money getting utilized for the betterment of the common poor people of Assam comes to the people’s mind now. But there are many rumours and stories about huge amounts of money being recovered from the militants when they were caught by the security forces and later on getting divided among the officers. The rumours also attribute the successful business ventures of many surrendered militants to the unaccounted extorted money. Some cynics even go further and express that the extorted money has played an important role in the sudden material development of Guwahati in the last ten years manifested in the mushrooming of shopping malls, pubs, posh apartments etc. But it is a fact that many surrendered militants now control huge and lucrative businesses in Assam with the twin power of money and muscle which was absolutely unthinkable for the Assamese middle class some twenty years back. During the early period, as part of their collection of funds, the cadres of the ULFA had also gathered the knowledge of many highly profitable businesses like the coal and the timber controlled mostly by the non-Assamese mafias (for example the dreaded coal mafia of Beltola area at that time) along
with the darker business secrets. As soon as they surrendered, with the active support of the State, they made a successful bid to a share in these businesses. Thus the unaccounted sums of money drawn from the extortions had resulted in the corruption creeping in insidiously into the organization. The vulgarity of that corruption showed its ugly face after the surrender of a large number of its cadres.

Now, let us see how its proclaimed programme of eradicating social evils like corruption in the public offices, consumption of country liquor, gambling, eve-teasing etc had impacted upon the conceived image of the ULFA at that time. When it came to its claimed fight against the corruption, its role was limited to serving extortion notices to the corrupt officials and using violent means when the demands were not fulfilled. But this act of taking away a substantial portion of wealth from the corrupt people was rather counter-productive. Not only did it spawn corruption within its own organization but a large amount was also collected in the name of the ULFA by many unscrupulous youths in several places of Assam. Therefore, although everyone in Assam was aware of ULFA’s collection drive at that time, nobody had a fair idea of how that money got utilized. Moreover, the ULFA had not raised its voice against the corruption of the AGP government at that time. The proximity of the ULFA to the AGP government had made many people suspicious of the commitment of the cadres of the former to its proposed new ideology based on ‘scientific socialism’.

But what gave the ULFA its super-heroic status among the caste Hindu Assamese middle class was its virtual war against the sale of country liquor, eve-teasing, gambling etc. Even from the reporting of the newspapers it becomes apparent that public humiliations were meted to bootleggers, gamblers and petty criminals in almost all places of the Brahmaputra Valley. Some over-enthusiastic cadres even went to the extent of putting a ban on the preparation of the traditional liquor which was a part of the customs of many ethnic communities of Assam. It outraged many communities and a large section of these communities rallied behind the URMCA to oppose the high handedness of some the cadres of the ULFA. It has been proved by history that social evils like drinking or gambling can only be eradicated through social movements involving all sections of the people particularly the women with a sustained campaign against these evils. The eradication of opium consumption was made a part of the programmes of the India’s Freedom Struggle in Assam and was successfully executed by the women
Satyagrahis. But the ULFA instead of involving the people or organizing a social movement used only the means of terror. So, as soon as the fear of incurring the wrath of the ULFA was over, the people got involved in these anti-social activities with renewed energy. But the subsequent turn of the events completely tarnished the projected image of the ULFA as the custodian of the morality of the Assamese people. Although the hollowness of the claimed moral high ground of the members of the ULFA was known to many even during its heydays, the immorality of a large number of its cadres and more so of its leaders became the talk of the common people of Assam after the vertical split of the organization when a section of its leaders decided to surrender in March 1992. Although it was not part of the written ‘surrender-package’, permits were distributed to some surrendered militants to open wine shops as an effort to generate self-employment. So, in the eyes of the people, the same local boys who used to punish people for selling country liquor now sold branded liquor. Factual accounts as well as rumours of drunken binge of the ULFA boys also reached people’s ears. With the flow of easy money, other vices also crept easily into the lifestyles of the one time revolutionaries. But what so ever be the explanations of the surrendered militants, it is the State which won a moral war against the rebels in a very subtle manner. With the lure of comfort and money, the State blew apart the high moral ground of the ULFA and exposed the vulnerability and moral decadence of the one time revolutionaries.

Undoubtedly, the organization scored success in some welfare projects across Assam by mobilizing the people’s participation. As appears from the narratives, the charisma along with fear of the ULFA worked well in its public welfare projects. As the people felt the need for such community efforts, it worked wonders when they found an organization to rally behind. But what is important is to notice that the people still remember the highhandedness of the cadres. Many people did not like the fact that some of the cadres chose to supervise the work instead of contributing their own physical labour.

Almost seventeen years have passed since the declaration of the President’s rule and the deployment of the Army. Many ups and downs came in the fate of the organization including the surrender of many of its top leaders and a large number of its cadres, the Government adopting the tactics of killing the innocent family members of the ULFA cadres with the help of the surrendered cadres, killing of the innocent school
children in Dhemaji town by a powerful bomb triggered off by the ULFA militants, a well-known littérateur’s efforts for a dialogue with the Government of India, its adoption of complete terror tactics like planting bombs at public places etc. Its popular support base has also undergone a lot of erosion particularly among the Assamese middle class which saw it as a flag-bearer of its aspirations during 1985-90. Although it is a matter of debate, it appears that there was an aura of mystery and romanticism surrounding the activities of the ULFA before the army operation was launched in Assam. Moreover, in spite of the excesses committed by some of its cadres in certain areas, the ULFA could earn a larger than life image in the entire Brahmaputra Valley during the period 1987-90. Some aspects of this image are discussed above along with its weaknesses. An obvious question that comes to mind is, “When did the benevolent romantic image of the ULFA get tarnished and finally ceased to exist in people’s mind?” The answer is a subjective one and ranges between the opinions that there was no romantic image of the ULFA ever to the perception that it still exits. Although extortions, kidnappings, killings and other violent activities continued, the development projects almost stopped after Operation Bajrang. No punitive actions were reported in the newspapers in relation to social reform after the army operations. The discovery of the mass graves is marked as the episode which for the first time exposed the systematic cruelty perpetrated by the ULFA cadres during the early period of its existence. Although the discovery of the Mass Graves and the existence of the highly decomposed bodies were reported in the media, but in the face of the pouring reports of the reign of terror let loose by the Indian army on the innocent civilians of Assam, the stories of the cruelties meted out to the victims who were kidnapped and whose bodies were found in the Mass Graves remained untold. But later on many horrific facts had come out into the open being narrated by the friends and the relatives of the victims. The torture committed on Dimbeswar Gogoi before he was killed bore the testimony of the barbarous torture perpetrated on the victims by the cadres of the ULFA at their Lakhipathar camp. Chaw Puspadhar Saikia cited post mortem report and gave a small description of the torture meted to Dimbeswar Gogoi. According to him the mouth, hands and feet of the victim were tied very tightly from behind, the teeth were broken with a hammer, many parts of the body were chopped off and acid was poured all over the body before he was killed. Dimbeswar Gogoi was not the only victim; the other fifteen people whose bodies were recovered from the
Mass Graves had received similar treatment at the hands of the ULFA cadres. Therefore, the discovery of the Mass Graves and its representations in the media is marked to end our study.

To summarize the study in brief we may say safely that the ULFA had been able to evoke a romantic ‘superhero’ image among a section of the people in the Brahmaputra Valley in its early period, but it appears from our discussion, both theoretical and empirical that there is a marked difference between the image of Robin Hood, the English ballad hero and the image of the ULFA in the early period of its activities. It will again be a misreading of the Assamese Vernaculars if we put the responsibility of creating a romantic, larger than life image of the ULFA on Assamese press during 1985-90. A close reading of the texts and talking with the people usually reflects the overall mood of the period marked by the myriad of emotions like euphoria, fear, hope and uncertainty.
End Notes

1 I owe this phrase and the understanding to Dr. Upala Baruah of Cotton College.
2 As ULFA was referred to in the common parlance.
4 ibid
7 Roger Lancelyn Green, an authority in myths and legends of early age did a remarkable job of retelling the story of Robin Hood gleaning it from the different available sources and making it a coherent text.
9 ibid
12 The session of the seminar was attended personally by the author.
15 A personal interview with the author.
20 ibid. p 101.


33 ibid. p 51.

34 ibid p 239.

35 ibid pp 241-242.


37 ibid. p 311.

38 This phrase has continuously been used in the statements of ULFA over the years.

39 The commonly used phrase in this discourse is “Kendra r Mahi aair sokure suwa niti “ or “Step-motherly treatment of the Centre”.

40 However it was still the anti-Bengali sentiment which pre-occupied the Assamese middle class till the end of the Assam Movement.

41 Saikia Nagen, ed. 1980. p137.


47 Ibid. p 75.


51 It was published as a small booklet in 1980. The publisher was Aniruddha Baruah. No other detail of the publication is available.

56 ibid. p 143.
58 It was organized in a RSS style and the people still remember taking lathi-trainings from the organizers of the ‘Volunteer Force’.
60 The author owes this particular information to Kankan Deka of Darrang College.
61 ibid
62 As has been emphasized earlier during the period of Assam Movement, ULFA like many other disparate local groups operated under the blanket of the movement and it had still not emerged as a coherent organization with a distinct political ideology.
64 The group under the leadership of Bhaskar Nandi.
65 That is the AGP government.
68 Pa-Phu is a popular adventure series written by Premnarayan Dutta (1899-1965). It exploits the adventure of five robbers called Pancha Phukan and abbreviated as Pa-Phu. There are twenty two adventure stories of Pa-Phu published between 1946 and 1975. The adventure of Pa-Phu resembles Robin Hood. They also rob the rich people to distribute the wealth among the poor people. Interestingly, there is a strong Assamese nationalist twist in the stories of Pa-Phu series.
69 The organization was re-christened as United Revolutionary Movement Council of Assam in its Bihpuria Conference in 1992.
71 ULFA till that time was seen as representing language based Assamese nationalism.
72 As told to told to the investigator by Dr. M. Taher, retired Head, Department of Geography, Gauhati University.
74 It is not that the permits for opening wine shops were given only to the surrendered militants. Many young men with the political connections acquired the licenses.