

Of Revolution, Liberation and Agency: Aspirations and Realities in the Lives of Women Combatants and Key Women Members of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)

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In recent decades, reports from women's human rights and peace advocates have brought out overwhelming evidence of the gendered nature of armed conflict, clearly showing that while all civilians are affected, women and girls suffer disproportionately on account of their sex and pervasive gender inequality. These critical analyses have also gone on to highlight the gender bias inherent in post-war/post-conflict recovery and transitional justice processes, and also demonstrated how this bias ultimately contributes to the creation of highly gendered post-conflict societies. In most cases, there has been little or no accountability and redressal for the full range of human rights violations suffered by women, nor any recognition of the agency of women during the period of conflict or the need for their continued engagement in political restructuring and social transformation in the transition from and the aftermath of conflict.

The devastating and corrosive impact of protracted armed conflicts in particular brings out new vulnerabilities and vulnerable groups, but it is seen that these vulnerabilities are directly proportional to the existing inequalities suffered by the group.¹ In a post-conflict or post-active conflict period, the vulnerabilities are simply reflective of the entrenched inequalities that are inherent in any society and were part of the social fabric in the pre-conflict period. Gender inequalities are undoubtedly the most glaring of these inequalities. But women are not a homogenous group: there are categories of women who suffer greater inequalities, especially in a post-conflict situation. A post-conflict period is part of a continuum of conflict, wherein elements of the pre or latent conflict stage and elements of the active conflict merge together, but it is also a period of de-construction and reconstruction. It is important, therefore, to look at all the realities of women's lives in this reconstruction. As the CEDAW General Recommendation 30 on Women in Conflict Prevention, Conflict and Post Conflict Contexts, highlights:

"While women often take on leadership roles during conflict as heads of house-holds, peacemakers, political leaders and combatants, the Committee has repeatedly expressed concern that their voices are silenced and marginalized in post-conflict and transition periods and recovery processes".²

Among the diverse categories of women affected by conflict, this paper focuses on the situation of women combatants. This is a subject that has received the least attention in peace-building efforts despite the fact that UNSCR 1325 recognises the active participation of women in combat and the importance of using a gender lens in Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes.³ Accounts from across the world emerging from zones of armed conflict or war show that women combatants face discrimination in various forms when the conflict ends and the post-conflict reconstruction process begins. Studies also suggest that women may be transformed by their experiences of participating in armed resistance, but they do not eventually gain equality through this participation. This report aims at understanding the complexities of the lives of women combatants and associates and the specific ways in which entrenched gender inequalities determine their lives at different stages. The report focuses on a specific armed resistance group called the United Liberation Front of Axom⁴ (ULFA) operating in the state of Assam in North-East India. The report is part of a larger endeavour to look at the challenges facing women combatants in the protracted armed conflicts of North-East India.

1. Methodology

The methodology consisted of field-level research and one-on-one interviews with 20 women ex-combatants and members at varying levels of the organisation. It also included a literature review, as well as information from secondary sources, including discussions with other researchers and activists working on or with women

¹ Goswami, Roshmi: 'Addressing ESC rights in Situations of Armed Conflict' in - Rajkhowa, Subhram (ed) & Deka, Stuti (ed); Economic Social & Cultural Rights Vol 1, EBH Publishers 2013.

² CEDAW General Recommendation 30 - Women in Conflict Prevention, Conflict and Post- Conflict situations, p. 11.

³ UNSCR 1325.

⁴ Axom stands for the state of Assam and is the Assamese way of referring to Assam.

ex-combatants. The women interviewed were identified through different means. Some of them were available in the designated camps set up by the Government to enable the peace talks; others were referred to us by grassroots organisations and individuals. Many agreed to the interviews on the basis of trust and sense of security with the field assistant as well as the principal investigator. While key questions were worked out in advance, the actual interviews were more or less unstructured and free-flowing within the given set of larger questions and issues.

2. North-East India

The North-East of India is the easternmost corner of the country and it is spread over an expanse of 25,500 square kilometers. It originally consisted of seven states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Sikkim, the eighth state, is a more recent addition to the group popularly referred to as the 'Seven Sisters'. Connected to the rest of the country by a narrow 22 kilometre corridor called the 'chicken neck' and with over 4500 kilometers of international borders with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, the region is extremely significant both geo-politically and strategically.

Map: North-East India



2.1 Context: The Socio-Political Background of North-East India

The region is also well-endowed with vast natural resource deposits, including gas and coal. It is also a recognised hotspot of biodiversity. Despite this, the region continues to lag behind the rest of the country in terms of development, with especially poor infrastructure and communication. This has resulted in a widespread feeling of neglect by the Centre and relative deprivation amongst the people of the region. The general perception for a long while was that the resources of the region have been exploited to fulfill the needs of the rest of the country without any corresponding development of infrastructure and opportunity in the region.⁵

The region is also peopled by over 200 indigenous communities, consisting of tribes and sub-tribes that are fiercely loyal to their ethnic identities and affiliations. These ethnic loyalties or fissures, plus the 'nature-centric'

⁵ In recent times, very pronounced neo-liberal norms of development are steadily being negotiated into the region, but that is yet another story

understated but expansive worldview that is typical of indigenous communities have been little understood by the Indian State. All of this has led to a deep sense of alienation resulting in different political demands from the many communities in the region accompanied by protracted armed and unarmed conflicts involving a range of actors. The social fabric of life in the region has been deeply affected by these diverse sub-national conflicts, ranging from political and civil struggles for self-determination or groups contending for a greater share of power or stake in governance and resource sharing, to inter-ethnic conflicts over fractured identities, scarce resources, contest over the control and use of natural resources like land, water, forest wealth and minerals or the more insidious state-sponsored 'low intensity warfare'. The adoption of neo-liberal economic policies has led to occasional growth in certain sectors and for a few, but the downside of this has been the exacerbation of horizontal inequalities as tribal communities and other vulnerable groups have become marginalised and dispossessed, which in turn has precipitated even more conflict.⁶ Over the decades, the conflicts in the region have become extremely complex and today, in addition to the original grievances, there are also the power games and mercenary objectives of vested interest groups, both state and non-state, who constantly subvert efforts at conflict resolution and peace building.

2.2 Conflicts in North-East India: A Snapshot

Conflicts in the different states of the region have arisen due to different causes and have varied objectives. These conflicts have also taken on various forms and involve different sets of actors. It is beyond the purview of this paper to go into all the complexities and details, but the brief account below is illustrative of some of the bigger and broader issues surrounding conflicts in the region.

In Nagaland and the Naga-dominated areas of Manipur, conflict arose with the Nagas' refusal to acknowledge the authority of the Indian State. Having resisted British rule (their first encounter with the British was as late as 1830), they desired to retain their autonomy after India gained independence, and they continue to mark their Independence Day on August 14, i.e., a day before 15 August, which is celebrated as Independence Day in India. The goal is an autonomous homeland called Nagalim. Heightened repression through army operations by the Indian State and high levels of violence perpetrated by both state and non-state actors have been the hallmark of the conflict in this region. A ceasefire agreement was finally negotiated in 1997 and peace talks with the leaders of the Naga movement have been ongoing ever since. The eighteen long years of dialogue have resulted in a few agreements but not enough for such a long duration and with no definite resolution in sight in the near future the situation continues to remain extremely fragile.

The conflict engulfing the state of Mizoram dates back to the devastating famine of 1959, which was met with gross neglect and apathy by the Assam Government. Before the formation of the state of Mizoram in 1987, Mizo-dominated areas in India were part of the Mizo district of the state of Assam. The Mizos had long resented the dominance of the Assamese and the step-motherly treatment meted out to them by the government of Assam. The growing discontent, along with the famine, ultimately led to the formation of a secessionist movement led by the Mizo National Front (MNF), which had evolved out of a famine relief team. The Mizo movement for independence, which lasted until the Peace Accord was signed in 1986, was met with strong counter-insurgency operations by the Government including air strikes by the Indian air force. Such attacks on civilian territory were unprecedented anywhere in the country.

In the state of Manipur which is the most diverse state in the North-East Region in terms of the number of tribes and sub-tribes that inhabit it, the conflicts have been far more complicated. For the Meiteis of Manipur, it was the dubious merger of the princely state of Manipur with India in 1949 that catalysed them to question their position vis-à-vis the Indian State. Violent resistance and counter-operations by Indian security forces continue till date. In addition, Manipur has witnessed violent ethnic conflict between different tribes and communities. Increased pressure on land due to a growing population, unclear land ownership patterns or improperly demarcated village boundaries and the appeasement of one community over the other by the State have been some of the root causes of these inter-ethnic conflicts⁷.

⁶ GR 30 chapter - India Civil Society CEDAW Shadow Report, NAWO 2014.

⁷ For instance, the trigger for the discord and subsequent polarization of the Meiteis and Nagas of Manipur was when in June 2001 the Government of India conceded the demands of the Naga revolutionary leaders to extend the ceasefire operational in Nagaland to Naga inhabited areas of Manipur as a precondition to resuming peace talks. The Meiteis feared that, by implication, this meant an endorsement of the Naga demarcation of the boundaries of Greater Nagaland or Nagalim.

The conflict in the state of Tripura has been propelled by the fear, concern and resentment of the indigenous tribal peoples at the prospect of losing their ethnic identity, land holdings and control over natural and forest resources. In the last three decades, the indigenous tribes of the state have been reduced to a minority and their land holdings have been reduced to less than thirty per cent of the total land, with the remaining land held by immigrant Bengalis who have come across the border from Bangladesh.

Similarly in Assam, the fear of being swamped by an immigrant population from Bangladesh across the border was the starting point of a long-drawn out period of unrest. Post-Independence Assam witnessed a phenomenal increase in population. With land remaining constant, the sudden increase in population density led to chaotic pressure upon cultivable land. There was also resentment against the Indian State, which the people felt was draining their land of all resources without allowing the local population a fair share in the returns. Furthermore, there has been a plethora of grievances in Assam against the dominant Assamese community by other ethnic communities at being marginalised and denied an equal stake at the system. The Indian State has dealt with the various conflicts primarily with a militaristic approach. Repressive laws and other provisions have been promulgated to address the situation, the most infamous being the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 or AFSPA. This draconian Act came into operation in 1958 and was first used in the state of Nagaland in 1960s as a temporary measure but has remained in operation now, in different parts of the region, for over six decades. Analysis of the use of AFSPA shows that it is essentially the lawless use of excessive force, which has created a legal regime that allows the armed forces to act with impunity, as the Act grants extraordinary powers to any military officer, commissioned or non-commissioned, to use lethal force if deemed necessary, to arrest, kill, enter and search any premises again on mere suspicion and without a warrant.

Needless to say, the fallout of these protracted conflicts has been especially devastating and deep on the women and girls of the region. Sexual violence, displacement and loss of support bases, disappearances and extrajudicial killings of family members, a lack of all forms of human security and a constant sense of fear and dread are some of the more obvious impacts, while the culture of impunity that has seeped into the very fabric of society has greatly undermined the basic dignity of women and girls and deepened gender inequality.

2.3. The Assam Movement and Genesis of ULFA

In 1978, a sitting parliamentarian in the state of Assam, Hiralal Patwari, died. This meant that a by-election in his Constituency of Mangaldai had to be held in order to fill his seat. When the electoral rolls were being prepared, it was noticed that there was a dramatic increase in the number of registered voters. Subsequent media reports and a statement of concern by the head of the Election Commission himself over the massive numbers of illegal settlers and inclusion of their names in the electoral roles triggered off a strong response from student bodies and sections of civil society. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) demanded that the elections be postponed till the names of foreign nationals were deleted from the electoral rolls. AASU demanded the 'detection, disenfranchisement and deportation' of the foreign nationals. Thus began the mass student movement called the Assam Agitation or Assam Andolan, which was joined by a number of political and cultural organisations under the aegis of the All Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) or Committee for the Assam People's Struggle, which included Assam's premier literary body, the Asom Sahitya Sabha. This movement has remained one of the biggest and most vibrant student-led movements in the country. The action consisted of the mass mobilisation of civil society for protest through sit-ins, picketing, satyagraha, strikes and mass signature campaigns, and black-outs at night. People joined in the thousands. Women from all walks of life and from all age groups were particularly active and visible in the movement. This unprecedented massive civil non-cooperation resulted in the complete paralysis of the administration and collapse of the provincial or state government. Educational institutions remained shut and the economy nosedived. The call for boycott of the parliamentary elections was hugely successful as even gazetted officers on election duty refused to cooperate with the government and printing presses refused to print the electoral rolls. It was alleged that the state police too was taking orders from the student leaders.

The movement further called for the blockade of crude oil flow from the oil fields of Upper Assam to the rest of the country, which was accomplished through the formation of human chains. The mood was extremely passionate and volatile, as many youth wrote slogans with their own blood saying *Tez dim tel nidu*.⁸ There was a blockade on other natural resources as well, such as plywood and teak. The Government came down heavily on the movement and on the movement leaders. The army was called in to break the blockades and disperse the agitators, censorship was imposed on the media, which was perceived to be sympathetic and President's Rule was imposed on the state.

The Assam Agitation was conceived primarily as a non-violent protest and non-cooperation along the lines of the movement for Indian Independence although the fallout was extremely violent.⁹ Around the same time, a section of Assamese youth decided to launch an armed resistance to what it perceived to be state terrorism and economic exploitation. Thus was born the United Liberation Front of Assam or ULFA in April 1979. The ULFA¹⁰ is a self-proclaimed revolutionary political organisation engaged in a liberation struggle against state terrorism and economic exploitation by India for the establishment of a sovereign, socialist Assam. Within a decade of its formation it emerged as one of the most powerful and violent outfits in South and South East Asia with support bases in both rural and urban Assam. It sought to establish a united Assamese identity irrespective of ethnicity, caste, class, tribe, or religion, which tremendously appealed to the otherwise somewhat marginalised multi-ethnic communities of Upper Assam and women were central to establishing this identity.

According to political analysts ULFA provides a useful and sophisticated model of a complex agenda that combines underground and overground activities. Support for it during the frustrating years of the Assam agitation was extremely high and it was able to operate with a host of sympathisers for a long period of time. Even in later years when its violent agenda more clearly manifested itself and instances of brutality were discovered inside its camps, it was able to sustain this element of support. As analysed by a very well-known and respected political scholar from Assam, there was no easy answer to why the ULFA despite its ideological weaknesses and aberrations, had been able to strike a responsive chord in the hearts of the Assamese masses.¹¹

2.4 Unified Command Structure of ULFA

ULFA has a three-tier organisational structure, namely (i) the Central Unit, (ii) District Units and (iii) Anachalik Units, as well as both a civil and a military wing. The military wing is headed by Paresh Baruah, who was the Commander-in-Chief and today belongs to the anti-peace talk faction. He is presently operating from an unknown location. The civil or political wing of the front was led by ULFA Chairman, Arabinda Rajkhowa, who fell into Indian custody in 2010 and is presently leading the peace talks with the Government of India. The district units are led by district Presidents/district Commanders and a district is further divided into Anchals, which comprise a number of villages headed by an Anachalik President. For operational purposes, ULFA divided the entire state of Assam into four zones, with each zone further divided into four regions. ULFA does not have a separate wing for women cadres and women are placed within this command structure.

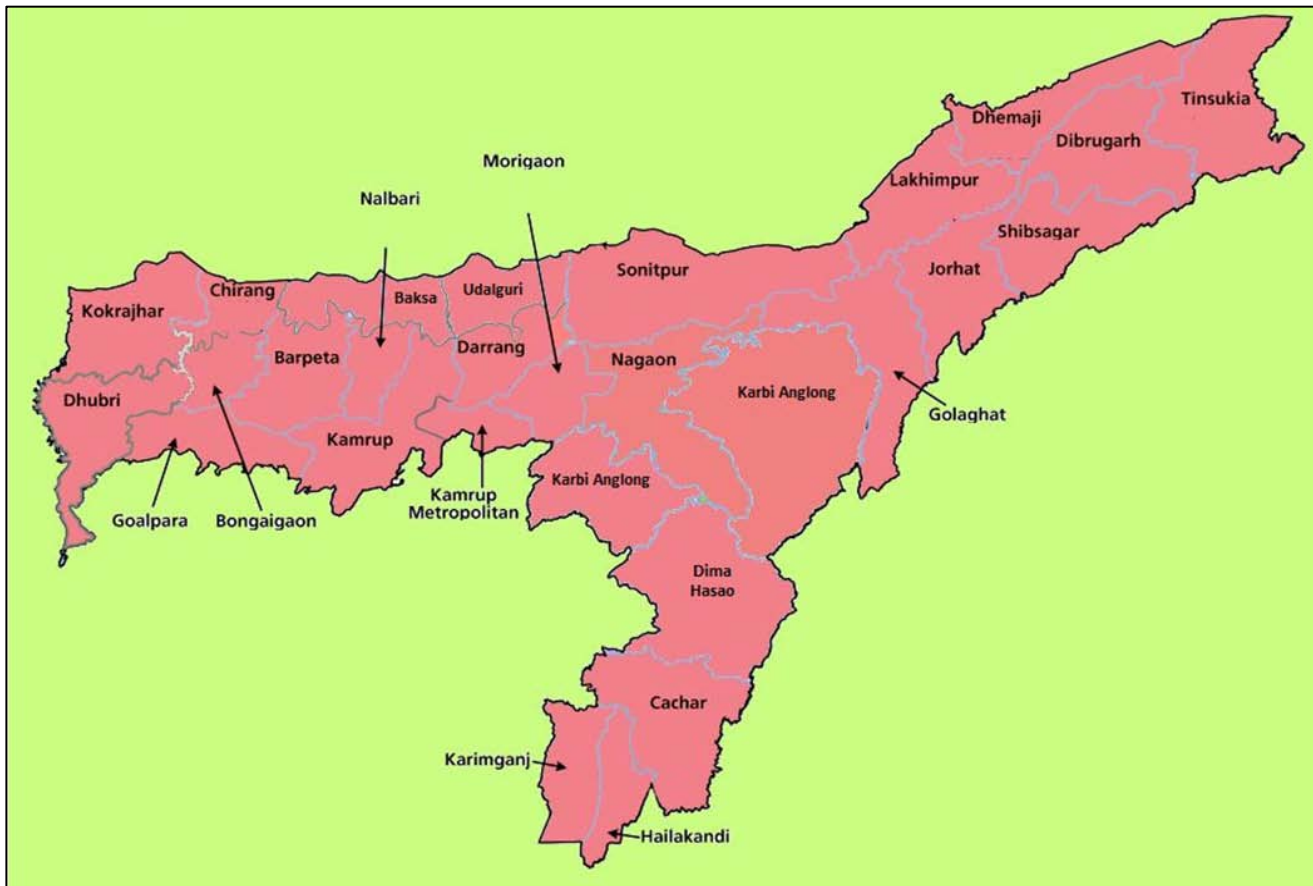
⁸ "Will give blood not oil".

⁹ See the Nellie Massacre February 1983.

¹⁰ According to the Government of India, ULFA is classified as a terrorist organisation banned it under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in 1990. Concurrently, GOI started military offensives against it, named Operation Bajrang November 1990, Operation Rhino September 1991, Operation All Clear December 2003 and Operation Rhino 2 led by the Indian Army. The anti insurgency operations still continues at present under the Unified Command Structure.

¹¹ Mishra, Udayon: The Periphery Strikes Back, Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla 2000.

Map: Assam (Axom) Districts



3. Women Combatants: How is 'Combatant' Defined?

Though no definite estimates are available, women have figured prominently in the armed struggles of ULFA. So far, about 200 women cadres have surrendered and going by these numbers, as well as rough estimates provided by former combatants, women constitute about 10 per cent to 12 per cent of the total strength of the rebel group. However, the more complex question is how and where women are positioned within the armed struggle. Given the ongoing peace talks between ULFA leaders and the Indian Government, as well as the other peace negotiations that are presently underway in the region, it is important to lay out the multiplicity of roles that women have played and continue to do so in the armed groups and the need to factor in those nuances to build durable peace in the region.

It has been seen across the globe in different situations that when a peace settlement opens the way for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) or normalisation efforts, women who participate in combat in varied roles tend to be categorised among the "vulnerable groups," a broad label that includes wounded or disabled male combatants and all women and children who accompany warring factions. This results¹² in women combatants and women in other roles in combat not receiving appropriate services or equal treatment in relation to opportunities, a place at the negotiating table (if there are ongoing peace talks), etc. in comparison to men, as they are not recognised explicitly as "combatants" or key players in the armed groups.

The interviews conducted with ULFA's women cadres underscore the point that even within the general category of the women militia, not all women were active combatants but played varied and equally important roles. In any disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, the main subject is the combatant. More importantly, the definition of who is a combatant is critical, for it determines who will receive reintegration benefits. In many instances, it is the gun-carrying individual who is considered a combatant, which is deeply

¹² Ernest Harsch, Women: Africa's Ignored Combatants, Africa Renewal, October 2005; <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol19no3/193women.html>

therefore problematic. Situations of protracted armed conflicts are incredibly complex and, in the armed conflicts of North-East India, some of which have gone on for decades and become multi-generational, the complexity is immense. In the Naga struggles, for instance, almost the entire community has been part of the resistance movement. Even in Assam, during the earlier years of the United Liberation Front of Assam's operations, the community, especially in Upper Assam, was integrally involved; the line between who was with or against the resistance movement was often blurred, as people ranged from being sympathisers and supporters to being active members, either as ideologues or active combatants. It has been seen that most peace agreements define which armed groups are part of the DDR process, but do not define what is meant by a combatant. The definition of a combatant is simpler when a group is homogenous and cohesive, with a clearly defined and unified command structure.

The interviews of ULFA's women cadres included a range of women with varying degrees of connection to the defined command structure of the armed outfit and with no clearly defined criteria of eligibility or requirements by which individual women were placed within that structure. On the other hand, individual women pledged deep loyalty to the organisation, most talked about being inspired by its politics and ideology and all of them perceived themselves to be revolutionaries and as such as "combatants" fighting to deliver "Mother Axom" from oppression by the Indian State. As a respondent put it:

"I did not join because of any expectations or ambition. Like me, 80% of the people of Assam at that time believed that the aims and goals of the organisation was noble and if asked today would agree that the Indian State had a step-motherly attitude towards Axom and was exploiting Axom politically. I therefore joined the organisation to protect and safeguard our state and its resources."

None of the interviewees expressed that once inducted, there were restrictions on their ability to leave the organisation; all but one confirmed that once they were recruited they did not wish to leave the organisation at any point of time. There are contrary media reports, however, which bring out the brutality with which deserters were dealt with¹³. It is generally accepted, though, even from accounts of other armed struggles, including the Maoists of Nepal, that once they are recruited, women display greater loyalty and tenacity than men. Armed groups have therefore given great importance to the recruitment of women.

Opinions differ as to how extensively a combatant should be defined. Those that advocate for building human security through the DDR process call for a broader definition. As Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations in 2001 emphasised, human security cannot be understood in military terms alone. It must necessarily include economic development, social justice, environmental protection, democratisation, disarmament, and respect for human rights and the rule of law.¹⁴ As he puts it, "Human security, in its broadest sense, embraces far more than the absence of violent conflict. It encompasses human rights, good governance, access to education and health care and ensuring that each individual has opportunities and choices to fulfill his or her potential. Every step in this direction is also a step towards reducing poverty, achieving economic growth and preventing conflict. Freedom from want, freedom from fear, and the freedom of future generations to inherit a healthy natural environment –these are the interrelated building blocks of human –and therefore national security."¹⁵ Those advocating for a broader definition argue that the definition of 'combatant' should cover all people who have been part of armed groups, either as fighting combatants or in supportive roles, which would include logistical or administrative functions as well. They point out that if this is not done, then in many instances victims such as sex slaves/comfort women would be deprived of the benefits that their captors, i.e., armed combatants would get.

This narrower definition is premised on the analysis that in conflict different groups have different needs and problems and clubbing everybody under the uniform category of ex-combatants takes away that specificity. This definition approaches the issue through a tight DDR lens rather than a long-term human security angle. The emphasis is on aid-effectiveness of reintegration packages, with concerns about their dilution should the eligibility criteria be too inclusive of diverse and amorphous categories of conflict-affected and related populations. The reality, though, is that there is a tremendous diversity of needs, aspirations, compulsions and

¹³ The Telegraph, Oct 17, 2008: 'Great Escape from ULFA Jaws'.

¹⁴ United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Millenium Report, Chapter 3, , [http:// www.un.org/millennium/sq/report/full.htm](http://www.un.org/millennium/sq/report/full.htm) 08/22/01

¹⁵ Kofi Annan. "Towards a Culture of Peace." <http://www.unesco.org/opi2/lettres/TextAngl>

fallout amongst the communities connected to armed resistance movements. This is especially true for the women involved, and interviews of the ex-ULFA women combatants invariably showed up the need to strengthen human security in the long term both for durable peace and as a preemptive necessity to stop the cyclic pattern of armed resistance in the region. As some of the respondents emphasised:

'We want universal peace for all. We want the kind of peace where common people do not suffer.'

'Peace is a desire for all but carrying on life by merely managing to make both ends meet while abandoning our lawful rights can hardly be called peace.'

'My definition of peace is one that is speedy and acceptable to the people of Assam. Continuing life with the barest necessities is not what peace should be all about.'

These seemingly simple articulations cannot be ignored, for they point to some of the root reasons of support for armed resistance in the region and the factors that enable recruitment from marginalised communities and areas.

4. The Complexities of Entry: Reasons, Compulsions, Motivation

For the women of ULFA, entry into the armed resistance has been diverse. As mentioned, the predominant reason is a belief in the revolution to free "Mother Axom" from exploitation. This feeling has persisted far beyond the days of the Assam agitation. The ideology propagated by ULFA drew tremendously on this revolutionary fervour and appealed to young women who wanted to bring about 'social and political transformation':

'I had already been working for Naari Adhikar Suraksha Samiti (NASS), Assam since the year 1997. I also worked for ULFA at the grass root level. Fascinated by its principles and morality I went away permanently to join ULFA on the 16th of June, 2001.'

However, the revolutionary fervour of the women of Assam was not ignited by the armed resistance of ULFA alone, but has been a feature integral to Assamese society, enabled by the general status of women in Assam.

4.1 Status and Activism of Women in Assam

Generally speaking, women in the North East region have had greater visibility and mobility and some level of economic independence. The tribal culture of the region is relatively egalitarian, and even non-tribal cultures do not enforce the rigidity of seclusion or the oppressive practice of dowry found in other parts of India. Concepts of solidarity amongst women's groups are fairly strong, as seen in traditional cooperative systems, women's markets and forms of cooperative village action, which seem to sustain and perpetuate an order of social cohesiveness. Women's collective work pattern is well-embedded in the social fabric through traditional and conventional value systems, which is often reflected in the functioning of groups and village organisations.¹⁶

In addition, women in Assam played significant roles and participated wholeheartedly in the Indian freedom movement between 1921 and 1947.¹⁷ In fact, as early as 1915 the women began organising themselves by forming women's collectives known as Mahila Samitis. Initially, these 'Samitis' or collectivities were formed primarily for the cultural, economic and educational empowerment of women and children. With the formation of the central or apex Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti¹⁸ in 1926, however, the mandate of the 'Samitis' expanded and reformatory issues like child marriage and widow remarriage and the promotion of women's education was taken up. Gradually, women also came to play a larger role in national political life and joined in actively in Mahatma Gandhi's call for the boycott of foreign goods and in promoting the use of Khadi (hand-spun cotton).

As elsewhere in the country, irrespective of status and position, women came out in hundreds and thousands to

¹⁶ Goswami, Roshmi, et al. Women in Armed Conflict Situations – A study by North East Network, 2005.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, the contribution of Assamese women towards the Indian Freedom Movement is little-known and their sacrifices and valour not been given due recognition nationally.

¹⁸ In order to boost the women's movement in Assam, Chandraprova Saikiani, with support from her co-workers, took the lead in the formation of a provincial women's organisation called the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS), with branches all over Assam.

participate in the Satyagrahas and various other activities of the Indian Freedom Movement. They went on protest marches and torchlight processions, picketed liquor and foreign cloth shops and educational institutions. The women not only joined the Quit India Movement, but also joined the '*Mrityu Bahini*', the underground movement and many were killed while involved in active resistance and declared martyrs. Post-Independence, Assam again went through a number of socio-political movements around issues such as the demand for an oil refinery, making Assamese the official language of the state, the demand for a second oil refinery plus the famous six-year-long student-led 'Assam Movement' or 'Assam Agitation' mentioned above. Women from all walks of life took part in large numbers in all of these. In the latter, in many instances, women formed 'human shields' between the agitating students and the armed forces and bore the brunt of the government's repressive measures.¹⁹ This level of social and political activism amongst the women of Assam is echoed by the ULFA women, most of whom were integrally involved either with the Mahila Kalyan Parishad or the Nari Adhikar Suraksha Samiti (NASS), both organisations working on women's rights in rural Assam.

I joined when I was a 2nd year student of Higher Secondary in Demow College. The organisation then worked in rural areas. They were always on the lookout for active women. Our elder sister used to attend public meetings sometimes. I had attended a ULFA (branch) meeting that was organised in the village. I was told at first that it was a women's meeting. After going there I came to know that it was related to ULFA's political discussion. It was more or so a beginning like this. ULFA's worker from the political branch facilitated my class on the issues of political and economical setbacks of Assam. I liked what I saw and heard which impressed me enough to join the organisation'.

'I enrolled as a member in Bakhor Bengena primary unit. I used to read a variety of newspapers, books and biographical novels early on from my childhood. During this time I also went through the mouth-piece of ULFA. Impressed by their aims and goals and ethical values I joined ULFA. At first I used to do minor works in our area. Army atrocities were at the peak during this time in the name of hunting out the ULFA cadres. Therefore I left home for good in the year 1998'.

4.2 The Motivating Reasons

Many of the women were driven by the zeal of social work and sacrifice for the greater good of the community or the idea of responding to the call of the community, as they put it. They were supported by their family members. Many romantically perceived themselves as 'heroines'.

My grandmother, Late Bogitara Rajkuwari inspired all of us seven brothers and sisters to read biographies of famous personalities. I therefore read the biographies of famous persons leading the revolutions of different countries from a very early age. I intensely desired to be like the heroines of some of these biographic novels. Being the eldest among the sisters, I felt especially responsible and would visit the houses of tea garden labourers of adjacent Lakuwa T.E. enquiring if their children were going to school regularly. My father and all members of our family supported my efforts.'

'From our childhood we were influenced by our elder brother to do social work. During the time I was doing my University Degree I was given a magazine on the aims and goals of ULFA. After minutely going through their aims and principles I was impressed and joined.'

The day I finally went away to ULFA, members holding leadership positions in the organisation came to our house and took me away with them formally after having food at our house. Boys and the elderly from our village accompanied me half a kilometer ahead on foot to see me off. They bade goodbye to me and then we all broke into tears.'

'My family members cooperated with me. The day I went away to join the organisation, a senior ULFA leader came to our house with a joining form and talked with my sister-in-law. He asked her—"This girl from your family wants to join ULFA. What do you feel about her decision?" My sister-in-law answered that it was my own choice to do as I pleased. Later my mother was also asked the same question and she

¹⁹ Regrettably though women were never a part of the decision-making process during the Assam agitation.

also gave her consent and when I was about to go away for training permanently she personally packed my bags. I was then just a little over eighteen years of age, completing six months after my 18th birthday. My elder brother and niece wished me good luck. I had complete support from my family members.'

4.3. The Seamless Boundaries

Many of the women were also part of the All Assam Students Union leading the Assam Movement or the Assam Agitation of the 70s and 80s. As mentioned earlier, apart from the issue of having the names of 'illegal immigrants' from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan), there was a high level of resentment against the siphoning off of resources from the state without adequate pay back. At that point of time, there was great camaraderie amongst all involved in the different struggles and for these women, the unarmed students' movement and the armed resistance were one and same. The reality during that time was of a united voice against exploitation, with seamless boundaries between a violent and a non-violent approach. There was considerable support for the armed revolutionaries, especially in rural Assam and many families provided safe transit homes for the cadres who needed shelter or healing. Many girls from these families subsequently joined the armed group, enthused by the stories the young boys brought, of life in the jungles, of daring acts, revolutionary politics and adventure. As one female ex-cadre puts it:

'I am a farmer's child and I have been struggling since the time I came to understand what it takes to manage the daily requirement of food. At the age when girls dream about being the heroine and other feats of fantasy, I grew up listening to ULFA's escapades. Our house was home to so many ULFA boys visiting us looking for shelter and food. I used to ask them about how ULFA evolved, what were its aims and things like that. They responded eagerly and explained in details about ULFA's aims and goals. At this time a secret office was created in our village to keep an eye on spotting hopeful candidates of both sexes for enrolling into ULFA. One day a group of five ULFA boys came to have their food at our house, explained everything and also asked me to work on their behalf. By this time my High School Leaving Certificate(HSLC) Exam result was out and I had taken admission in the University degree. On the pretext of going to classes, I engaged myself in work for ULFA, organising meetings without the knowledge of my family members. Thus, like this I spent almost two years working for the organisation while continuing my post-HSLC course without the police knowing anything about it. After appearing my final year University exam, I went to ULFA for good.'

In those initial years, there was great admiration and support for the leadership of ULFA. While the older people referred to them as "our boys", there was a high level of adulation, a kind of hero worship of these leaders amongst the young girls. They were seen as 'dada' or 'kokaideu'- elder brother - a role which symbolised protection, responsibility and a sense of security. Family connections were also a strong reason behind recruitment:

'I initially joined the organisation around the 1980s. As I was underage, my name was enlisted in ULFA only in 1994. I would like to point out that I was fond of doing social work from my childhood. One of the founder members of ULFA happened to be one of the elder brothers in our family. Earlier, I was the first woman member of Yuva Chatra Parishad²⁰ from its inception in 1978. Some of the ex-members of Yuva Chatra after quitting the organisation formed the ULFA. I also participated in a discussion of the organisation and inspired by its aims and purposes I joined the organisation.'

'I joined the organisation in the year 1994. My elder brother was a member of ULFA and in this connection my elder sisters and I also offered our help for its organisational work. Later, police and CRPF started beating up our family members at home and unable to bear the atrocities of police I joined the organisation and went away.'

'I joined the organisation in the year 1990 but had been working since 1989. My younger brother organised meetings on behalf of ULFA besides helping with other activities from the time when he was a student of class X. I used to see many ULFA leaders from outside our area staying in our house

²⁰ Youth organisation.

working under cover. They used to address me as 'baidew'(elder sister). One day I asked them why they were on the hiding like this and what was their objective. Once, when their constitution was kept in my custody I went through its contents and asked them if only the boys have joined their organisation or the girls have enrolled too. At that time my younger brothers were still students, and I urged them to continue and finish their education first. I began to think that I could provide some leadership in the struggle for independence and for successfully taking the struggle forward. So I identified eleven women to work initially for the organisation at the local level under my leadership and finally we became part of the organisation.'

4.4. Seeking Safety: The Rise of SULFA

By the 1990s, as the armed resistance by ULFA got more intense and encounters between the two sides became increasingly brutal, the Government of India worked at luring ULFA cadres to surrender with lucrative surrender packages. By this time, the local community was also getting tired of the violence. In 1992, the first batch of surrenders took place, consisting primarily of a large section of second-rung leaders and members. This was followed by another batch in 1998. Surrendered militants were allowed to retain their weapons purportedly to defend themselves against their former colleagues; they were also offered bank loans without any liabilities to help them re-integrate into society. This loose group, which came to be called the Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam (SULFA), emerged as an infamous mafia-style collective, and played an important part in the armed politics and business of Assam. Some of the operations they took part in were staged for political and economic reasons by local and national governments, but the most infamous of SULFA operations were those in which they were used against their former ULFA colleagues and families, to either coerce or threaten them to lay down arms and surrender. The threats took the form of the dreaded "secret killings", which occurred when Assam went through a very dark phase of terror. During this time, unidentified gunmen assassinated the family members of ULFA leaders in a spate of secret, extra-judicial killings between 1998 and 2001. Active members of ULFA were targeted, but the killings were more specifically directed at their unarmed family members (both near and distant) and at suspected sympathisers. In some instances, entire families, including women and children, were gunned down.

An official commission called the K N Saikia Commission was set up to probe the assassinations. Its findings pointed out that the killings were politically organised.²¹ The victims were family members of ULFA members, and they were executed by the police, with co-operation from the Indian Army. This was indeed a brutal counter-insurgency tactic that followed a recurring, recognisable pattern. The gunmen were former members of ULFA (now SULFA), who approached their targets at home, at night, knocking on the door and speaking in Assamese to allay suspicion. The victims were either shot when they opened their doors or abducted and killed, and the corpses were found the next morning.²² These killings had a chilling effect on all sympathisers as well as ULFA's other casual associates, but also contributed significantly to many young women joining ULFA for their own security. These young women joined believing that perhaps the armed group would provide protection from violence and that being formally inducted into the 'community' or 'inner circle' of the 'revolution, rather than remaining on the fringes, would institutionalise that protection.

'I never thought that I would join ULFA. I was then the organising secretary of the Sivasagar district cell of Naari Adhikar Suraksha Samiti (NASS) and till then had never worked for ULFA. At that time some unknown killers (infamous Secret Killings) wiped out the family of Uma Gogoi shooting all six of them in the night.'²³ During this period the government tortured the families of ULFA cadres physically and mentally and with the help of SULFA murdered them through these secret killings. An ULFA cadre taking shelter at Uma Gogoi's residence at that time was killed and the arms and explosives found on his body were seized by the police. The then Superintendent of Police of Sivasagar district was killed by the same explosives that exploded during inspection at the SP's office. In retaliation, Uma Gogoi's six family

²¹ The K N Saikia Commission, which was set up to investigate these incidents, largely put the blame on then-Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta, although the state police, the army and the SULFA were possibly jointly responsible.

²² These killings also led to a cycle of revenge killings by the ULFA, the most well-known being the Moran Polo Ground encounter of 2001, in which many SULFA leaders from the towns of Sibsagar and Dibrugarh in Upper Assam were assassinated.

²³ Umakanta Gogoi and his entire family, were wiped out on the night of 11 September 1999 in Borbil Gaon, in Assam's Sibsagar district.

members were all slaughtered by SULFA. We were told to surrender by these SULFA and the administration but we were in no way connected with the ULFA to surrender. Besides us, many boys and girls of the area were asked to surrender. We were very frightened and feared for our lives. We were not associated with the ULFA in any way but needed some kind of protection. I along with two others therefore got in touch with two ULFA boys and went away to join them without knowing clearly about their aims and objectives. Uma Gogoi was one of our family relations (uncle's home). Suspecting that we will end up the same way like Uma Gogoi's family I went away'.

As another interviewee, who was marginally involved with ULFA at that time, puts it:

'Atrocities of these SULFA on our family members – father, mother, sister and brothers became intolerable. They tore off the clothes of my sisters, beat them up and ransacked the house destroying all our belongings. Perhaps I would not have gone to join ULFA permanently had these SULFA ruffians not harassed my family members when looking for me. Apparently I would have become a victim of their infamous secret killing if I had not.'

Economically we were very poor and managed our lives through daily wage in other people's farms or homes. But even then whenever the ULFA boys sought shelter in our home our family treated them very well. After I went to ULFA, the police and SULFA harassed my family to a great extent. My father used to be picked up regularly and taken to the police station or the army camp and beaten up time and again. After I was caught and detained in Dimapur²⁴ police station, the police tried their best to bring my father to Dimapur and when he refused he was tortured but he never went to Dimapur police station. Despite being poor and illiterate my father showed grit and determination. He respected the decision I had taken as an adult. The SULFA repeatedly threatened my family members to get me out of ULFA.'

Girls involved with human rights work were also targeted and felt compelled to "go away": 'I went out of Assam in 1995 as I had been already marked'.

I joined ULFA in the month of August, 2006. Prior to this, I was with Manab Adhikar Suraksha Samiti, (MASS).²⁵ Because of the kind of work it does, MASS came under the 'surveillance' list and the police and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) continuously looked for us under some pretext or the other. I joined other people's organisations in the state that was questioning harassment by the army and the CRPF and finally one fine day joined ULFA. Our family was a supporter of ULFA from the very beginning and my youngest brother volunteered time for social activities for the community and perhaps for this our family had to face the brunt of army atrocities time and again. Our family was never allowed to live in peace by the army and SULFA. I was not forced by my family or anyone to go to ULFA. In fact, I went to ULFA by my own free will.'

4.5. Notions of Empowerment

For some women, the goal of women's empowerment and emancipation seemed to be the motive in joining up. While none of the interviewees discussed instances of any overt repression in their own families except for the usual patriarchal controls, many felt that society at large was not just to women and a revolution that talked about justice would be the way to go to bring about equality in society. ULFA did, in general, challenge the hierarchies of caste, class and ethnic divides in Assam and the women extended that to issues of gender as well. ULFA also provided opportunities for young girls to be trained as paramedics or nurses, which fulfilled the aspirations of girls just out of school in rural Assam and at the same time provided the organisation the availability of basic medical assistance like the know-how to administer first aid for bullet injuries, burns etc., which were common, plus handling common infections.

'I joined ULFA in 1994. There was this meeting of Moran Students' Union and Moran Unnayan Parishad at the time when I was still studying and I attended the meeting as a girl belonging to the Moran tribe.'

²⁴ A commercial town in Nagaland bordering Assam.

²⁵ A human rights organisation based in Assam.

In the meeting, various people spoke in favour of forming a women cell of the Moran tribe because the custom & policies for the women belonging to the Moran society was very orthodox, for which the tribe was not able to progress as well as the other communities. And although I had just completed my high school leaving certificate exams I was given the charge of the Moran Mahila Parishad as I had spoken openly about the difficulties faced by Moran women. After taking charge I went house to house and village to village trying to mobilise the Moran community and advocating for Moran women's rights. While going out on work I used to ride on a Raj- doot motorcycle belonging to a cousin. During the course of my work I met an ULFA cadre and under his leadership many of the ULFA boys started staying at my house very often. My cousin was a school teacher and he did not like this but had no choice as the boys justified that our home was being used for a greater cause. I also started doing some minor work for ULFA. They gradually convinced me that working for a single community would not get us anywhere and that ULFA speaks in favour and development of all the people from different castes and tribes living in Assam besides the neglected, exploited and targeted womankind. I began to aspire to go beyond the women of the Moran community only, wanting to work from the broader ULFA platform for overall development of all women belonging to different caste and tribes of Assam. I was convinced I would be able to make a difference and that is how I joined ULFA despite opposition and criticism from the students' body of my own tribe'.

'From a very early age I was conscious of the obstacles women face at every step and experienced the patriarchal controls in my personal life. The inclusion of gender equality and the focus on creating a fair and unbiased society in ULFA's constitution impressed me greatly and I joined the organisation intending to work for the cause of the women of Assam.'

'Our mother was a very social person. Though she did not have much education, when- ever the Central Reserve Police Force harassed the people in the village during meetings of NASS my mother would lead protest rallies. I was inspired by her to work for women and our people. I joined ULFA with the intention of working for the land and its people representing the women and also with the aim to claim our rights and everything that the Centre had taken away from us'.

'ULFA trained me in nursing to provide first-aid. I had to treat their sick. I used to go around the villages accompanied by a senior worker of ULFA and discuss ULFA's aims and goals with the people. By then I was marked by the administration and police came to our house looking for me.'

4.6 Women's Empowerment: Myth or Reality?

As elsewhere in the world, despite these accounts of entry, the question of these young women making a clear and 'informed choice' to join the armed resistance is debatable. Undoubtedly, unlike armed groups in the different conflicts in Africa or in Colombia, violent abductions or forced recruitment of the women was not evident. But niggling questions remain: did the women really have an alternative or a real choice? Was it simply circumstantial or a romantic riding on the wave and sentiments of the moment? Some became part of the organisation, in a very casual but somewhat clandestine way, i.e., by being taken by male associates from their villages to training sessions without the knowledge of their family members. Village life in general and rural Assam in particular proceeds at a pace that is easy but does not offer a whole lot of new possibilities or novel excitement. Secret or clandestine meetings and gatherings might then be said to tickle young people's curiosity and offer a change from the normal. Many of the interviewees' forays into the world of armed resistance started simply with an interest in attending these meetings. As one respondent puts it, *'In this way [by attending the training session] I came to be a part of the organisation unknowingly and knowingly—to an extent.'*

Many of the accounts show a more complex form of entry and some clearly indicate a blurring of the lines between force, gentle coercion or emotional pressure; for some, there was a fatalistic sense of 'no return' after they impulsively or otherwise had taken the first step with little or no information on the implications of their decision.

'The first meeting I attended was in December 1989 when I was a student of Class X. I was taken to this village meeting by an uncle without the knowledge of my parents. I myself did not know what the meeting was all about. I had little understanding about ULFA or of their ideals and ethics. The meeting which lasted for two days turned out to be a unit forming meeting and there I met the ULFA leaders including the Chairman, Mr. Arabindo Rajkhowa. I was nervous that I was attending such a meeting without the knowledge of my family. My uncle promised to inform my parents later but he never did. During the two days, we were given an orientation on the aims and goals of ULFA but I did not understand much. Thereafter a 15 days training was organised in the village. Little did I know then the implications of attending such training! I thought I would continue to stay home and continue with my schooling. Apparently after completing political classes and arms training there is no turning back. In the fifteen days' training we were not given any idea that we would have to leave our homes for good. We were made to wear army fatigues during the training. I should have understood but I did not. A much older woman colleague asked me "Don't you know you have to leave home forever?" I cried a lot but was told not to speak about my emotional breakdown with my family members.'

But the point of no return could also have come to be because of the way the State labelled all with the same brush and whose repressive approach and operations often pushed sympathizers or loosely affiliated women into definitive combat roles.

'Initially in 1991 I worked as a general member of the organisation sharing and discussing its aims and goals with some women and Mahila Samiti members. I soon got labelled though and became 'wanted' by the police and army. We were picked up for interrogation several times during which we were beaten up and verbally abused with obscene language. Our homes were ransacked by the security forces, who would also make off with any valuables that were found. Consequently, I went off to Myanmar in the year 1994.'

The complexity of the situation is brought out more succinctly by another woman combatant who, notwithstanding her willy-nilly entry into the organisation, rose to become one of its most trusted and valuable members, with a tremendous amount of agency.

'There was really no compelling reason. My entry was strange. It was just a series of events. For me there was really no difference between AASU and ULFA for we were fighting for the same cause - of justice for "Mother Axom". There was an ULFA camp in the village. I used to sing Hindi songs, which was objected to by some of the ULFA boys and one day I got into argument over this with the then Commander in our area. I know the boys well and referred to the older ones as them as "dada".²⁶ I also had great admiration for Chairman Arabindo Rajkhowa. One day I was picked up by one of the senior cadres, made to sit behind him on his motorcycle and taken to the nearby camp.

I met the leaders there who tried to convince me about their struggles and ideology and the need to make bigger sacrifices for our common struggles. I never came back to my home thereafter. My family members came looking for me and tried to talk to the ULFA leaders. I remember I was hidden under the bed where the negotiations were going on between my Borta²⁷ and the senior cadre who had taken me. I wanted to speak out but was not allowed to. He told my family not to worry about my joining ULFA. My Borta did not want me to go and suggested they take his son instead but they insisted they only wanted me. After a week of continuous discussion with my family members my fate was sealed.

At first, I was not allowed to go home. After a very busy training schedule, I came back to my home for my father's shradhya²⁸ which happened 6 months after his death. I transferred my father's job to my elder brother after I came back from the first ULFA training. My family members were sympathetic to the ULFA cause and admirers of Aurobindo Rajkhowa but they did not want me to join. They were willing to sacrifice one of the boys for the cause but ULFA only wanted me. I was so young. I cried a lot initially and was homesick but later as I became an important trainer I felt very useful and proud about the responsibilities entrusted to me.'

²⁶ Term of reference for an older brother.

²⁷ Term of reference for paternal uncle more specifically father's older brother.

²⁸ Hindu rituals for the deceased which are strictly followed by the Hindus in Assam.

The same respondent went on to say how highly valued she was within the organisation, although initially the Commander-in-Chief had opposed her recruitment. She also explained how the leadership of ULFA eventually confided in her that they wanted to develop strong women cadres, as women were far more reliable and disciplined.

'I was very strict and did not compromise with discipline. Wearing the Uniform of ULFA, we had the responsibility and major duty to establish a selfless organisation and to take care of our people. New recruits went through the first three months' training with me. In those three months, I had to teach new recruits discipline, politics, self-defence and how to use a weapon. I had to transform the cadres completely from what they were before joining ULFA. The uniform carries with it a sentiment, courage, responsibility and every- thing. After wearing that tag I felt like a soldier of Assam.'

World over, girls and young women are highly valued by armed groups as they are perceived to be highly obedient, compliant, easily manipulated, deeply committed and intensely loyal. Researchers have pointed out that now it is an established fact that despite their profound invisibility and marginality, young women are integral and critical to the overall functioning of armed groups. The account given above substantiates this in the case of women involved in the ULFA struggles. As one respondent says:

'When I was arrested for the first time I thought I would be killed because at that time most of our members were murdered in fake encounters and given electrical shock. But I was mostly tortured mentally. I however resisted from answering most of their questions especially the kind of questions that would jeopardize our organisation. I promised myself at the time when I first signed my name in the joining form that I would bear the pain but never give in should any questions of this nature come my way.'

5. Women's Roles, Responsibilities and Realities

Despite the pain and pangs of leaving home, the initial years were heady years for some, with their imaginations fired by visions of the great heroic actions that they would undertake for their motherland. For these young girls from the small towns and villages of Assam, moving out of their familiar surroundings, living together as a community ('during my stay in the organisation there used to be a sense of camaraderie that we see among family members'), discarding the traditional mekhela sador²⁹ for combat fatigues ('.....once I wore the ULFA uniform I was committed to upholding the values and ideals of the organisation) and trekking across the harsh and alien Naga hills into Myanmar were all incredible feats, which instilled in them a deep sense of emancipation:

'...We proceeded to Myanmar through the Patkai mountain terrain. We were the first of any women batch of ULFA to have gone to Myanmar. We had to travel throughout the day and night climbing the mountains clutching at every possible foothold or creepers to steady ourselves. It was an incredible journey!'

Or, as another respondent recalled:

'I was so fascinated! We were given political lessons on how to carry forward the struggle living together as a family. I had no regrets leaving my home, family and my birth- place. We went to Myanmar climbing difficult mountains but had so much vigour and mental strength that in spite of carrying sacks of rice weighing 40 kgs or so on our back across four to five 'bastis'(hamlets), we hardly felt any fatigue!'

The same respondent continued:

'I reached the position of 2nd Lieutenant due to my competence and provided leader- ship to twenty combatants five of whom were women. I could not afford to make any mistake as I was responsible for all the combatants under me. It is quite a feat to be able to command men who are armed to the teeth.'

Not only do their points of entry differ, but the roles, relative power positions and experiences of different women are varied, and determine their conditions in the post-conflict scenario. From the interviews, we noted that these

²⁹ The two piece traditional outfit worn by Assamese women.

range from being high-level combat trainers to security guards, messengers, gun-runners, ideologues, community mobilisers or simply leaders' wives. Nonetheless, there is a hierarchy and the women who were part of the military wing either as combat trainers or active combatants themselves had a different sense of accomplishment and sense of power:

'At 18 years of age, I became a combat trainer. I felt very proud, a role unconventional for women and a role which proved that women can do everything'.

But being part of the military wing was extremely demanding, and required tough discipline, physical fitness, rigour and determination at the personal level. As women, they also have to deal with the dynamics of power, entrenched patriarchal mindsets and the machismo culture of the armed male cadres including some of the leaders, who did not initially support the idea of women being part of the military wing. As a respondent recalls:

'At first it was very difficult. There was resistance towards me being a trainer including from the Commander-in-Chief himself but I learned and proved myself and later on I became indispensable and the men feared and respected me. My voice was very loud and authoritative. I was very tough and did not tolerate any indiscipline. During particularly difficult periods like the Operation Bajrang I helped to keep the morale of the cadres as well as the leaders high apart from taking on risky communications. To be an instructor, I had to read many books, including Karl Marx in just 20 days. I served 17 long years for ULFA of which I worked as a trainer for 12 years conducting at least 25 training camps in total. Each camp was for around 3 months and at one go I had to train as many as 270 cadres alone. Each and every moment was a memorable one! The trainings would be held in different locations in Assam as well as in Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Bhutan and Myanmar. I have also trained Indo-Burma Revolutionary cadres.'

Being security or bodyguards to members of the leadership was also a role that gave the women a tremendous sense of self-worth and pride. The women took this role very seriously, and displayed impeccable trustworthiness. A respondent who was given this responsibility recalls how a particular leader had implicit trust in her and her alone to get him to safety, and just a few days before he was gunned down he had communicated to her his fear and unease that the end was near, as she was in another part of the state on a different assignment and unable to provide him security.

Despite ULFA's ideology of removing ethnic divides, inequalities and hierarchies there were layers within layers in the organisation, and age and family background perhaps also played a role in determining the relative positions of women cadres. For some, life after the initial recruitment and training was not as exciting and responsible as others.

'During my time with ULFA as a member I could not take any part in any decision-making process. Our work consisted of collecting firewood and cooking only. We would finish our dinner by 2 PM and be allowed to sleep in shifts during the night. We often spent sleepless nights. When the situation deteriorated or food supplies failed to reach us from Assam we had to go without food.'

'Within the organisation, I began to understand a few things and realised that some members in the organisation were better off. The fellow women cadres with me who were educated and articulate were given more importance. I acutely felt the discrimination. The smart ones were supplied with books of revolution and politics secretly. But we did not get to read such books'.

During those early days, promoting the ideology and the political thinking of ULFA was an extremely important part of work within ULFA; women were selected and assigned that critical task. Many of the women members of ULFA were already members of other social justice organisations in their respective areas. In particular, they were closely associated with the Nari Suraksha Samiti (NASS) or the Mahila Kalyan Samiti and they used these contacts and connections to promote the ideology and politics of ULFA. The basic concept of the armed movement had to be explained to the people and as one woman explained - *'.... needed to be implanted deep inside the brain and psyche of the people'*. The women who focused on this aspect of the work were part of the

cultural and political wing of ULFA and the success of this contributed significantly to the strong support base in rural Assam that ULFA had till the late 90s. This work therefore was as important as the military wing. Women were integral to this work and traveled extensively and constantly across the different districts of the state with their mission.

'I was made the administrator of a regional eight-member women's group. After this, two members from each district were selected to provide political teachings. To facilitate political classes. I had to master Marxist, Leninist theories, etc. as well as learn the history of guerilla warfare, the tactics practiced during that time by countries like America, Vietnam and Russia and the political situation of Assam. I got in to political and organising work in Bhutan and Myanmar, which I continued after returning to Assam. I was engaged in organising work in every district. In the district units, we were also given political and surveillance duties. After becoming successful in these duties we were transferred to the Central Committee.'

5.1 The Humdrum of Camp Life

After the excitement of a new life was over, life in the jungle proved to be extremely hard and challenging for many. This included getting accustomed to the rigorous routine and strict discipline of camp life, grappling with long bouts of a deadly form of malaria called 'moklong' in the local parlance and, of course, constant fear and dread. Whether they had joined up on impulse or in the grip of revolutionary fervour, many were perhaps unprepared for the drudgery of long periods of waiting and watching in the jungles, cut off from communities and the realities of day to day life in the society to which they had avowed to bring social justice. What was happening within the rank and file of ULFA itself was also not something that was easily shared, on account of security concerns and other reasons, and this pervasive sense of uncertainty was debilitating. The house-to-house mobilisation that the earlier work entailed kept the women in close contact and maintained a rootedness in the community which gave them a sense of purpose and valid reasons to persevere with their aims and objectives. Many of the women cadres in the jungle, especially the ones excluded from knowledge of what was transpiring at the higher echelons of the organisation painfully missed this human contact and connectedness to the real world. As one respondent puts it:

'I consider my earlier days and the time of working among the people on behalf of the organisation much better. Then I was able to work among the people discussing the issues of Assam and observing their problems at close quarters. There is a different level of comfort and sense of purpose. The comfort of working among the people and for love of the people was something else altogether. After leaving Assam permanently for another country we had nothing much to do. We had no meetings to attend or any other activities except eat and carry on living. We had no knowledge about the work in Assam and idled away the time year after year. Mobilising people by staying in Assam among the people was more important than being sent to another country. We also had no knowledge of how the organisation was progressing in Assam.'

However, women who were assigned more responsibility had a different opinion, and felt that no matter how tough the going was, they were happy and learned a lot which helped them to handle the challenges of life outside the jungles.

'Had I not joined the struggle I would have been married to an ordinary person and running a simple family life by now. I learnt many a lesson from the struggles, lost a lot but also met many other co-activists of national and international repute and also from Assam which was very inspiring'.

'I was very simple and grew up within a clearly structured social system of my ethnic tribe. Now when I think about it I begin to wonder that if I hadn't gone to ULFA I would never have learnt to struggle with the realities of life. So while I got the determining qualities from my own social system, being at ULFA I got the ability to face and tackle various situations the way I am doing currently towards bringing up my daughter in the absence of my 'missing husband'.

5.2 Confronting Unchanged Gendered Roles

Overall, though the lived realities of the women combatants point to the fact that regardless of the point of entry, their options, realities, roles and power relations were embedded within broader gendered power structures and identities. Despite the fact that these women transgressed traditional gendered norms by joining the armed resistance engaging in combat and defying gendered assumptions, their status as women invariably determined their lives. Even in the jungles, they were subjected to the same societal norms and controls as in their natal homes. One such gender stereotype was the institution of marriage. It is not clear whether the ULFA leaders took the role of 'kokaideu' or 'elder brother' seriously and as such were duty-bound by Assamese societal norms to get their 'sisters' married or whether they did not want to deal with the complications of love affairs and sexual encounters in the camps, but solemnising the marriages of young recruits was a regular and important feature of the revolution. Interestingly, although the ceremonies were performed as per the ULFA constitution, which is based on left wing ideology, the entire process was highly patriarchal. Most of these marriages within the camps were arranged marriages, with the girls having little or no choice in the matter. In fact, it is likely that the rules were far more rigid within the organisation as a result of its emphasis on strict discipline, in contrast to the comparative flexibility evident in the wider community.

'During that time marriage for those girls attaining marriageable age was being discussed. Proposal for my hand came from my husband's side. At first I did not agree as we had gone there for the interest of our motherland and not to get married. Later they tried to convince me by reasoning that people holding a sense and a belief in the revolution would be needed in the future to carry forward the struggle, for which we needed to get married. Perhaps if I were still in Assam I would not have relented but in a certain atmosphere in the midst of the jungles of Myanmar and Bhutan the question of marriage began to get precedence.'

'In 1995 April my marriage with our chief was declared. I was asked for my hand also by a Manipuri guerilla of the rank of Sergeant as a gesture of goodwill between hills and plains. But later our chief announced his intention to marry me in public. To be fair he had also formally sent his proposal to me in 1994 and had sought my permission to make the announcement. Our wedding did not follow the customs of either of our ethnic communities but was solemnised as per ULFA norms. My friends from the different districts also attended. After the wedding he did not take me with him. He said –"Your friends have come, spend some time with them. When they leave I will come back and take you with me." After my friends left he sent his boys to take me to him after which our married life actually began. We got to talk to each other only on that day. Earlier I was in awe of him. He said then that we could not have a conventional married life as we were both guerillas and we have to understand our individual responsibilities. After spending seven days with me he left for Bhutan.'

'My wedding was fixed in this General Council on 29th November, 1995, but interestingly neither I nor the man who was supposed to marry me knew who the respective bride and groom were. I had gone to Bhutan to participate in the General Council, not to get married. When I joined ULFA my father had also advised me not to get wrapped up in matrimony. Therefore I refused to get married but our Chief persuaded me. The groom was chosen by them and we were given a separate room to talk to each other barely three hours before the wedding. As I was a senior officer and the man only a district-level worker, he asked me –"Madam, my marriage has been arranged with you do you have anything to say about this?" Both of us were asked to bathe in a nearby river as part of the wedding rituals and then married according to the ULFA norms.'

In fact, marriage was almost like a political arrangement, as it addressed some of ULFA's positions. It bridged the class hierarchy, as in the case of a woman connected to the royal house of the Ahoms³⁰ and the man from a peasant class background, as well as the ethnic difference between the two, and the divide between Upper Assam and Lower Assam.³¹ Perhaps it was also intended to convey – artificially – the message that despite different roles within the organisation ULFA was committed to egalitarianism. But even for this respondent who was closely related to the leadership there was no question of choice or any consultation. If a woman questioned the decision or made an independent choice, then she could be asked to leave as pointed out by the following respondent:

³⁰ The Ahom dynasty originally from and ruled Assam based out of Sibsagar in Upper Assam.

³¹ Upper Assam considered to be the seat of Assamese culture and decorum while Lower Assam is better known for economic entrepreneurship.

I was in love with a boy outside of the organisation. Respecting its rules, policies and directives on marriage I appealed to the leadership to accept the boy I loved as a member. My request was not accepted whereas in the case of the men it was the contrary. Many of the ULFA cadres have married girls from outside the organisation and brought them into ULFA. I felt very sad when my request was rejected and slighted. When I was refused the freedom to marry the boy I walked out not waiting for permission to do so.'

5.3 Unfulfilled Expectations and New Fears

While the women mostly conceded to the arrangements made for them, they came to married life with some expectation of togetherness, love and comfort. For most part, though, the women led lonely lives, waiting for news of their husbands, going through difficult pregnancies by themselves in hostile terrain and facing the harshness of jungle life with no medical facilities whatsoever. Deliveries in city hospitals brought up additional issues of security and in many instances close encounters with the security forces took place on such occasions. The common people were mostly kind to a woman with a baby in her arms and they found shelter in different homes but could not stay anywhere for too long due to security concerns.

'After reaching Myanmar I was married in December 2004. Meanwhile the situation in Myanmar had deteriorated further. There was shortage of food. I was by this time pregnant and getting onto my seventh month without any medical aid. Parallel to this, army atrocities continued in Patkai and Burma region. Walking on foot for one month in my seventh month of pregnancy I managed to reach 2nd battalion camp in one piece. Taking a rest for fifteen days I trekked down to Assam. Throughout this long journey of hell I did not find my husband beside me who was following his own command. My child was born in a Dibrugarh nursing home. My husband saw the baby a month after he was when organisational duty brought him to Assam. I was then taking shelter at someone's house. But then, we could not afford to take shelter for too long as that would be risky for our shelter providers. So most of the time I moved from place to place with the baby in my arms. At times I spent the nights in the leaf houses of the tea gardens making my child sleep on the ground with only a piece of cloth to lie on'.

'People in Assam helped me a lot when I had to move from one place to another. I had to change my bearings just after giving birth, like a tiger does with its lair. When my elder son was in my womb I was jailed. Later after spending 4 months in jail I was released on bail due to my pregnancy. After coming out I was forced to lie low alone on my own. At this point my husband was also in jail. I had come face to face with the CRPFs many a time and there was not a single night when I could sleep without fear and proper food for sustenance. I had to give birth to my child in such a condition. I thought the child in my womb would be born with open eyes. The doctors and owner of the Nursing Home was arrested on the same day of delivering my child and right after 20 minutes of my leaving the Nursing Home on charges of providing shelter to me.'

'I have spent a span of eight years of my married life till the day of his disappearance. If I calculate the time and days spent with him during these eight years it would hardly come to three years together. Rest of the five years I hardly knew where he was and what he was doing. I barely got to meet him three to four days in a year. Our daughter barely knew him and addressed him as 'mama' (maternal uncle) as she did to the others accompanying him. This hurt him but it was the truth. But then it also hurt me that he was not there for me as a husband.'

Life as a combatant entailed intense hardship, constant movement and running away from the Indian security forces trying to find shelter and cover, but the enormity of this lifestyle and its implications perhaps was driven home more intensely once a child was born. These women, who for most part were single mothers, had to also worry about the safety of their offspring, which brought with it a different kind of fear. As a combatant put it, as far as their own lives were concerned they had joined the resistance knowing that death was inevitable. As mothers they could not think the same way about their children:

'One of the worst times was just after my daughter was born. When she was 8 days old we headed off for Bhutan where we finally arrived when she was 25 days old. But the whole journey was an intense nerve racking adventure. At one point we were surrounded by the Army. We hid under a hay stack (kheroni) and lay there from the morning to late evening - almost 8 long hours. I had the baby to my breast and prayed that my little infant does not cry and she did not! Maybe a spiritual power gave that baby enough patience to understand the conditions. My husband and I had two pistols. He asked us to flee away while he would cover me and fight till death. I told him not to panic and that they will not find us and if they did then he should shoot me and the baby first. But they did not find us. Next we tried to cross the border but a villager informed us that whole border was sealed by huge number of army personals. We were in a dilemma and could not decide what to do then. Again we were saved by heavy rains. You cannot imagine how heavy it was! We had one umbrella. My husband covered our daughter with a Naga shawl and we made our way slowly towards the border. We had to cross a river where the level of water reached up to my throat! The river was in spate carrying debris and a mass of water plants. We got horribly entangled in that mass and only through sheer will and determination managed to get out of the water. I was severely bruised and bleeding and my clothes were totally blood soaked. At 3 am in the morning we crossed the Bhutan border. We checked our daughter whether she was dead or alive. Miraculously, she was alive.'

Another respondent, who barely managed to escape from a particularly violent encounter with the Indian security forces, recalled:

The shooting was so intense that sparks flew when the bullets hit the bamboo groves. I thought I was dead. My son was badly hurt. With sheer determination to see my son through this ordeal I managed to reach safety. I was so frightened at that time that I decided to hand over my one year old son to my mother for the sake of his life but I could not be separated from him for too long. I worried incessantly for my son fearing that the army would catch us and kill us or that he would die in my arms as he was getting thinner by the day. I realised then that the most important thing for me was my son - much more than my life and the motherland. I still say today that women members from the armed movement are better off remaining single. Marriage would definitely pull back the drive within oneself and put a hold on the struggle. This fear and futility eventually made me and my husband surrender but neither I nor my husband have gone astray from our ethical values even if we may get the label of SULFA'.

5.4. Operation All Clear: The Final Fissure

While many of these near-death encounters were faced individually, the full implications of their realities as a collective surfaced and hit hard during the highly successful and brutal 2003 Operation All Clear. This was undertaken by forces of the Bhutanese Royal Army purportedly in collaboration or at least with some kind of logistical support from the Indian security forces.

The Operation was launched one wintry December morning to flush out 30 camps belonging to armed militant organisations in Bhutanese territory. The dense forests and the steep mountainous terrain of Bhutan bordering Assam had long been an ideal place for militant organisations from the North East to establish their camps and ULFA had set up their camp on Bhutanese soil as early as 1992. Over the years, some kind of an arrangement for mutual benefit was worked out, where the ULFA provided assistance to the Bhutanese in handling dissent within the kingdom while the Bhutanese authorities followed a policy of non-interference. However, there was continued pressure from the Indian government to flush out the militants.

According to the Bhutanese account, prior to the 2003 Operation, ULFA and the other groups were issued several notices to remove their camps and on one occasion the camps were removed only to be relocated to another site within Bhutan. Operation All Clear was conducted after the last date of the ultimatum had passed. The ULFA position is that Operation All Clear was an act of great betrayal by Bhutan and more specifically by the King of Bhutan. The previous day, an emissary from the King had come to the camp with gifts to announce that

the King would be visiting the next day. The King had visited the camps on several occasions before so this announcement was not unusual. Undoubtedly, there is some truth and justification on both sides, but the fact does remain that the Bhutanese were aware of the presence of large numbers of unarmed women and children in the camps. The next morning, rocket-launchers and missiles descended upon a scene of simple domesticity - women busy preparing 'til pitha'³² to welcome the King of Bhutan, preparing children for school, cooking or eating their morning meal and the men sprucing up the camp for the King's visit. The attack was totally unanticipated and threw the inmates of the camp – both men and women – into total disarray and panic. For married women cadres with children, the safety of their children was their first concern while for the others Operation All Clear seemed to be the moment that their guerrilla training had prepared them for. After the initial pandemonium, the women rose to the occasion, some leading other women and children to safety from the mortar attacks, while others prepared for combat and vowed to die fighting.

On 15th December, 2003, Bhutan camp conflict took place. It was in the morning when most of us were busy cooking food. Sound of a single shot reached our ears and we thought it may have been fired by one of our boys in jubilation of the king's³³ visit which we were expecting. Soon empty shells from the mortars came flying down to scatter everywhere. When the intensity of mortar fire increased we started running. Sergeant Rahul Dutta from Jorhat was badly wounded and his son Munna, killed on his lap. His wife, Mridula Baidew went hysterical for her dead son and refused to leave her wounded husband. Their seven- or eight-year- old older son pleaded with his mother to leave saying he was still alive and asking her to take him away. Having a daughter myself I realized what a child means to its mother—maybe even more than the country and your own life. Mridula Baidew was not wearing any army fatigues but her usual 'Mekhela Chador' for which guiding her through the rough and rocky hills was quite a feat. We spent 3 dreadful days crawling inside caves from hill to hill without water without food. The situation was so overpowering that it silenced the children till hunger overtook their fears and they began begging their mothers for food. We finally walked straight into an army ambush. They ordered us to raise our hands in surrender from a distance. We waved the white gamucha³⁴ to pass the message of peace. Our small children started crying out –“Mama (maternal uncle) don't kill us, please don't kill us!” One little girl suddenly embraced one of the soldiers crying for food and water. Children of that age hardly knew anything about ULFA and feeling sorry at their fate we were probably spared. Whilst leading us towards their camp after arresting us the army men kept taunting and kicking us all the way to camp. There was both Indian and Bhutanese army in the camp. After formalities of transferring our custody to Assam we were sent to the jails.'

'I was plastering the walls of my hut with mud and hurriedly got into organising the women with my hands full of mud. Information from the camp above was relayed reporting that Rahul Dutta sir was hit by a mortar shell and his 11 12 yr old child was killed. His wife crying over her dead son was refusing to move. Their elder son Ankur was telling his mother not to cry consoling her that he was still alive and pleading her to get out of the area. Taking the dead body of the child from Mridula, Bening Rabha sir placed it on a polythene sheet. Everybody was out of the area except me. I was wondering who to go with. I picked up handful of ammunition, two rifles and a pistol. I was considering shooting myself should the Bhutan army try to rape me never to give up like this after having gone through such a long span of our struggle. Subsequently I joined Bening Rabha and other comrades and ran amidst the raining mortars which killed many. The memory and pain of leaving the dying comrades behind with whom we had shared our moments throughout the long struggle without any treatment is still fresh in my mind. Later Bening Rabha sir decided to get the women, children, elderly and wounded out of the area somehow to a safer place asking me to go along but a few of the younger comrades refused to let me surrender before the Bhutan army so three us women joined the men. We were 55 in all. We slipped away in the night. It was extremely tough surviving on the tender part of banana shoots, sprout of a certain reed and seeds from trees we were not familiar with. The boys picked up the seeds that they saw birds eating, ate the seeds first to check for poison and then gave it to us. We however miscalculated our route and found ourselves caught right between two hills where the army had laid

³² Traditional Assamese sweet made from pounded rice, black sesame seeds and molasses which require a lot of skill in its preparation.

³³ King of Bhutan.

³⁴ Traditional hand woven Assamese all purpose hand towel.

an ambush. We would have reached Assam territory had we been past a bridge after crossing a river. We were just about to cross the bridge when the army roared an order — “Halt!” and down came thousands of army men from both the hills. When we tried to escape they encircled us blocking any chance of escape from all sides. Rabha sir also tried to find a way out to run away when I waved a white towel that was in my hand. Meantime Rabha sir destroyed all documents that was in his possession and his satellite phone after which he broke down crying loudly. The army rounded up the male cadres and tied them up but left us three female cadres free. We were all dragged to the camp like a herd of cattle. After being detained for 3 days we were sent to Assam and jailed. The whereabouts of the missing 15 ULFA sergeants along with Bening Rabha sir is still unknown. Fate of other male cadres and leaders arrested by the Bhutan army is still twisted in a maze twelve years after the incident. Neither the Union of India nor the Bhutan government has intimated any information to their family members till date.’

Operation All Clear strongly cemented ties and solidarity among those who were in it together, but in general has created a big rift between them and the others. Women whose husbands are untraceable till date are extremely bitter and feel let down by the organisation as they grapple with the challenges of day to day living and of being ‘half widows’ with no sense of closure. In such a situation, past grievances hitherto unexpressed also surface, exacerbating the bitterness.

‘There was no scope for freedom of speech in the organisation. A know-all attitude invited trouble. Fate of getting politically murdered was inevitable if one knew too much. I am deeply hurt and frustrated. My husband is still traceless post the Bhutan Army Operation of 2003. Getting rented accommodation has been difficult because of my past. Any male visitor is viewed with such great suspicion by my house owner.’

In addition, many are totally cynical about the peace process that is presently in place:

‘The people of Assam can see what can be said in this regard. Personally, I never wanted this process of talks that is presently going on. We wanted a positive outcome from the struggle. We cannot say even today what the present discussion would suggest.’

6. The Insecurities of Peace-Time: Broken Promises, Harsh Realities and the Challenges of Living

Apart from grappling with the emotional and physical effects of the Bhutan operations, many of the women combatants also have a whole array of issues to deal with. Most often, in post-conflict reintegration processes, programmes designed for women combatants and agreed to by the negotiating parties attempt to fit them back into stereotypical gendered roles and activities, despite the fact that during the years of resistance these women had moved much beyond these stereotypical roles. Existing research and analysis of women combatants in different contexts including the Assam context shows that victimisation was in fact closely intertwined with agency, whereas in the times of ‘peace’, these women feel marginalised and disempowered. The present-day reality facing ULFA women is indeed one of a highly disempowered existence. Many of them have simply become invisible. The married ones have gone back to the homes of their in-laws and grapple with having to fit into the role of the ‘ideal’ daughter-in-law favoured by conservative Assamese society. The unmarried ones are luckier and have returned to their natal homes where there are less restrictions. Some along with their husbands have set up small enterprises – book-binding units, photocopying shops – or have gone back to the tradition of weaving handloom. Others who have a little family land are involved in subsistence farming. But all the women interviewed spoke at length of the difficulties of peacetime, the sense of loneliness and loss of a community:

‘Life is very lonely. We do not meet the former cadres any more. We need to have a forum but we are so caught up in this materialistic world, there is no constructive thinking amongst us’.

Lack of any kind of visibility, economic pressures of mundane life, the bewildering societal demands and their sincere efforts to conform to society and to societal norms puts tremendous pressures on the women - the kind of pressure that their years away in the jungles did not prepare them for. As different respondents put it:

'Life has been very difficult coming back. There are so many demands by society - both economic and societal. Sometimes I feel life in the jungles was so much easier even if there was hardship and no luxury. Coming back, I have tried so hard to conform to society and change the people's stereotyped notion about ULFA being 'unruly youth'.

'I hope my demeanor change people's opinions. At present I am deeply affected by in-justice, corruption and the superstitious beliefs and indiscipline I see all around me.'

'My identity was that of a revolutionary combat trainer. There was no time to think of God, leave alone take the name. Today, that independent identity is lost. I feel odd and sad. At present, I am an Aioti (devotional singer), a bowari in the village, fully controlled by the society's expectations out of a woman. This was something I had challenged and walked out of to join the outfit as a forum to challenge many of these issues. It was an ideological forum to challenge discrimination and structures. I had proved it as a trainer but the sudden transformation from a combat trainer to a house-wife is painful, adjusting to a contrasting role is difficult. In the first year after my return, I submitted not willingly but because of social compulsion. Also, I wanted to prove that despite being a militant woman I can adjust to any situation or need.'

And then there is the frustration, deep regrets and accompanying bitterness of a failed cause, of lives and sacrifices that went nowhere and achieved nothing. Respondents sadly confessed:

'When I went to join the organisation I thought I would be able to tell the people of Assam one day with our head high that look, we have been able to get justice and secure our rights. Sadly today we have lost the right to speak with a clean conscience'.

'We had gone to the organisation expecting a lot from the struggle - nothing personally but for the greater interest of the deprived and exploited people of Assam. Since peace dialogues are going on I cannot say outright that we have not gained anything worthwhile. But I cannot help but feel guilty and deep anguish - the pain and agony of the Bhutan All operation, the martyrdom of thousands, or memories of the sufferings of the wounded. Errors committed by a handful of our leaders led to hundreds of common people sacrificing their lives for nothing. Each time I recall these incidents I break down. I am especially anguished and feel such a sense of helplessness seeing some of the members leading a lavish life currently.'

'I cannot express the guilt after losing the thirteen thousand odd members in the struggle. Sometimes I think I should have died also. We are living such a life of misery having engaged ourselves in the struggle that when family members of the martyrs visit the camp we are ashamed to speak self-assuredly with them. I feel very sad whenever I see them. An old aita (grandmother) often came to the camp and stayed in my room. Her pregnant daughter was gang-raped had killed by the Bhutanese army. When she comes to my room and cry, I do not find words to console her unable to forgive myself. Had the pro-talk group's dialogue with the government taken the right direction we would have felt better. All this torments me.'

6.1 Peace Talks, Settlements and Participation

Participation, or lack of space for participation in formal peace negotiations and processes, surfaces as a very significant gender marker indicating the perception of the status and position of women combatants within the armed groups both by the armed groups themselves as well as the State. This has long-term implications for the women returning back to societies after considerable periods of time.

A formal place at the peace table, however, is not the only gender marker, as peace processes are complex and can open up exciting possibilities. There is an increased realisation today that a post-conflict moment once peace processes have set in is indeed a transformative moment that can be seized to secure socio-economic rights, gender justice and human rights for all members of society, while also catalysing the emergence of a new rung of leadership. Meaningful reintegration needs to take into account both women's victimhood and agency and must be conceptualised and framed as a means towards social transformation to change the conditions and position of female ex-combatants.

An attempt at initiating a peace process between and the Government of India was made in June 2008 when leaders and cadres of the Alfa and Charlie companies of ULFA declared a unilateral ceasefire and tried to compel the top leaders to come to the negotiating table with the Government of India. They were, however, expelled by the top leaders and this attempt at peace went nowhere. The threads of this initiative was resumed after December 2009, when top ULFA leaders were deported to India by the Bangladesh Government and jailed by the Indian Government. The jailed leaders took the initiative to form a 'Citizens' Forum' consisting of intellectuals, writers, journalists and other professionals. The leaders were released on bail in January 2011 and the first round of peace negotiations were held in February 2011 and is presently ongoing. The former Cultural secretary of the outfit is the lone woman member on the ULFA peace negotiating team. While she is committed to women's rights in her personal politics, it is not clear how much she would be able to put on the table during the negotiations. Apart from the conditions of the women cadres in the designated camps there are also disconcerting questions like sexual violence, disappearances and killings by both state and non-state actors that need to be addressed for real closure on the violence and sacrifices made by many in the past three decades. Despite disappointments and moments of hopelessness the women still have hope and a real desire to see change. One respondent summed this up:

'Peace talks are now going on with the leaders. I hope it comes to a positive conclusion. Peace with justice and give and take. We have been criticised for what we had done knowingly or unknowingly. These talks and negotiations are also been criticised. But still a hope is there amongst the people regarding a satisfactory solution which will provide Assam a turning point'.

Many of the women ex-combatants of ULFA have in them the grit, the perseverance, commitment to a cause, belief in social justice and the capability for social mobilisation. If the ongoing peace process is positioned as a strategic opportunity for social transformation and gender justice, and once the more immediate and pressing socio-economic needs of the women are addressed, their potential could be channelled towards a more meaningful way of their reintegration into society. Involving women ex-combatants in critical roles as peace activists and social mobilisers has been tried out in other post-conflict contexts.³⁵ This enables the women to reclaim their agency and contribute towards social transformation, which is the core of durable peace. Interestingly, women combatants debunk the assumption that women naturally contribute towards conflict resolution and peace-building. What is important is understanding that there have to be peace dividends for women that encourage the women ex-combatants to want to build peace.³⁶

One criticism of DDR processes in different contexts is that while there is much focus, publicity, resource commitment and political will to push the DD, very little is done thereafter on the R, or reintegration, which is equally complex, needs long-term commitment and greater resources. Although the Assam process does not strictly conform to the accepted technicalities of a DDR process, it is important that there is adequate focus and sincere political commitment for meaningful 're-integration' of the ex-combatants if the goal is lasting peace in the state. At present, most of these ex-ULFA women lack skills, have no access to capital, credit or opportunities and in many instances are being pushed back into the kind of poverty which was one of the factors that drove them into armed resistance in the first place.

It is important that consultations are held with the women to identify the skills they want to acquire instead of providing skills based on gender stereotypes that are not only irrelevant to the women but also undermine their agency. In addition, there are no gender-sensitive psycho-social support in terms of counselling and other such services to address issues of violence or enable the transition and reintegration back into the community. There is also no engagement with the receiving community, which also needs to deal with past trauma and overcome barriers and prejudices to receive the returnees. The ex-ULFA woman then has to be facilitated to make yet another transition from 'vic-tim' to 'agent', from being stigmatised to being valued. On her unusual journey in the quest for freedom, she too has grappled with layers of entrenched gender inequalities and the yoke of patriarchy albeit couched in the heady guise of a 'revolution'. The knowledge of that lived experience and that journey can be the cornerstone in conceptualising and creating a cadre of committed and passionate peace advocates at the local level. In peace building and conflict transformation efforts in general, and in the state of Assam in particular, not building on that potential would mean the loss of a critical opportunity.

²⁶ Goswami, Roshmi - UNSCR 1325 and Female ex combatants - Case Study of the Maoist Women of Nepal'. Briefing paper UN Women 2015.1.

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