When Revolution Restricts Freedom: A Study of 'Insider Violence' in the ULFA Movement

Vivekananda Journal of Research
January - June 2022, Vol. 12, Issue 1, 23-39
ISSN 2319-8702(Print)
ISSN 2456-7574(Online)
Peer Reviewed Refereed Journal
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https://vips.edu/journal/

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Abstract

This article is a study of 'insider violence' or violence by members of revolutionary organizations against women of their own society in the specific context of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Scholarly debates have amply focussed on the phenomena of embedding the mother-figure in the nation or women as custodian of 'national' culture in national liberation movements across the world, but the topic of rebels acting as oppressors of 'native' women has largely remained confined in the realm of 'imaginary history'. A gendered exploration of ULFA- the most radical expression of Assamese subnationalism till date- has largely remained elusive. Drawing from fictional narrations, autobiographical writings by women and personal interviews I argue that ULFA's stated goal of a sovereign, independent Assam was mired in masculine biases. These biases in turn ensure that formal history writings tend to ignore the acts of violence against women by members of progressive, revolutionary organizations. For preserving the memory of those forgotten in the process, it is necessary to widen the definition of violence against women; only then a comprehensive history of a crucial moment of contemporary Assam would be possible.

Key words: *ULFA, insider violence, imaginary history, Assam Movement, benevolent patriarch, masculinity.*

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INTRODUCTION

Feminist scholars have adequately commented on how in national liberation movements, the nation-often equated with mother- assumes a feminine form (Daniele 2014, Jayawardene 2016, Yuval-Davis 2008). Women's bodies become the marker of national honour as well as national humiliation. Normative ideals of 'culture' and 'proper' behaviour may create specific difficulties for women, which are likely to be swept aside as 'minor inconveniences'. How would women's freedom feature in an atmosphere like this? In this article, it is attempted to explore the question of violence against native women by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). It must be clarified at the outset that this is not an attempt to draw a false symmetry between violence against women perpetrated by state security forces and by ULFA. We term the latter as 'insider violence' and these merit a detailed discussion as when the very people involved in national liberation movement are guilty of violence against native women, it could potentially lead to gendered definitions of liberty and equality in the future nation state-if ever it came into existence.

The duality of violence that women within rebel organizations face- from the state security forces and within the rebel groups- have been studied in the contexts of the Naxalbari Movement (Roy 2015), insurgency in Manipur (Samom 2016), Nagaland (Kikon 2016), the Arab-Israel conflict (Sharoni 1999). According to Roy, for Naxalite women experiences of 'every day and symbolic violence within the movement' was as significant as state repression. Her book narrates several instances of 'bhadralok male comrades' and men in shelter giving families sexually harassing women activists. Such incidents mostly went unreported for fear of losing safe shelters and also perhaps to avoid violent retribution within the rebel organization (Roy 2011: 102-29). Commenting on the armed insurgency in Manipur, T.A. Samom (2016) argues that while violence against women by state security forces are publicly protested and on certain occasions, the perpetrators are punished, such violence by members of underground groups is largely met with silence. In 2006, twenty-five women in the Hmar villages of Lunthulien and Parbung were allegedly raped by cadres of the UNLF and Kangleipak Communist Party. These parties claimed their innocence, but the Hmar People's Convention alleged that because of the atrocities of UNLF and KCP, people had to flee to the relief camps in Mizoram. Even though civil society organisations sent a number of fact- finding teams to inquire about this incident, no one has been able to publish a concrete report till date. Even the formidable Meira Paibis have remained silent on this issue. According to Samom, there are visible public protests against rape and sexual assault by security forces perhaps "because the army is seen as an occupation force and rape by them is interpreted as a weapon of subjugation" (2016: 244-245). Similarly, in her study

of the prevalent 'culture of impunity' at the backdrop of conflict situation in Nagaland, Dolly Kikon (2015) argues that state authorities either refuse to register a case against members of Naga insurgent groups, or even when a case is registered, insurgents threaten the survivor and all those who help her with dire consequences (p 30-31). In her essay Simona Sharoni narrates an incident of a Palestinian woman who is beaten up by Palestinian youths on suspicion of being a collaborator. That the woman was known to 'sleep around', added to her vulnerability (Sharoni 1999: 490).

ULFA AND THE ASSAMESE WOMAN:

The United Liberation Front of Asom or ULFA was formed in 1979 with the express intent of 'liberating Assam from the colonial occupation of India'. For close to three decades, it was the most potent expression of Assamese radical subnationalism that warranted more than one armed responses from the Indian state. With the bifurcation of the outfit into the 'pro-discussion' and 'pro-independence' factions in 2011 (Misra 2011:10), the idea of an independent sovereign Assam appears to have lost most of its relevance, but it would not be wise to write off the organization just yet[1].

From mid 1980s to early 1990s when ULFA was at its most influential phase, it inflicted unspeakable violence against civilians, political opponents and anyone considered enemy of the organization (Baruah 2020: 136). The mass graves with decomposed dead bodies discovered during operation Bajrang in Lakhipathar (Dutta 2008: 75) are often taken as illustration of the inhuman violent punishments meted out to those deemed as 'enemy of the nation and society'. This article attempts to look into the incidents of direct and indirect violence against the ordinary Assamese woman at that time- most of which have remained ignored, or confined in the realm of fictional narratives. It must be clarified at the outset that I do not try to draw any false equivalence between state violence and violence of non-state actors, the intent is to draw attention towards a normalized understanding of freedom as a masculine concept. What Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) wrote in a different context can be paraphrased to find resonance with our present discussion- the value of the colonial exploitation thesis to women in Assam is diminished because it evolves from an andro-centric view point that is rarely acknowledged. Not only women are overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when men speak for women. Even if Assam were to be independent one day, the 'authoritative universal voice' usually male- would still control majority of

1 Recent reports in the Assamese press suggest that ULFA (independent) has seen a surge in recruitments. It has also been reported that some members of the state security forces also joined the organization in the first week of January, 2022. See *Amar Asom*, 09/01/2022.

women's lives. It may be noted here that unlike what Samom notes in Manipur, in Assam there were attempts to dismiss allegations of rape of civilian women by the armed forces[2]. It is likely that a rather narrow understanding of violence against women insulates the silence regarding acts of violation by the insurgent group. If rape and brutal sexual assaults alone are considered as violence against women, several other equally traumatic experiences could be overlooked. Noted Assamese litterateur Nirupama Borgohain's experience during the Assam Movement is a case in point. One of the most important attributes of this movement was large scale participation by women across social strata (Misra 1980). Impressive scholarly writings are available on the subject, with few mentions of violence against women. Borgohain, a reporter with as Assamese weekly at that time, had to face extreme verbal abuse, stalking, public humiliation and ultimately termination from her job simply because she had reported on "large scale vandalism and barbarity against men, women and children of minority communities by Assamese villagers" and was empathetic enough to request a group of visiting doctors to provide medical assistance to badly injured people from the minority communities (*EPW,* 1980: 735). This incident rarely finds mention in discussions on violence during the Assam Movement (Hiren Gohain's book *Tejor Akhore Likha* (2017) in Assamese is a notable exception) as Borgohain was 'merely threatened' and there was no actual physical attack. It is only by widening the definition of violence to incorporate such incidents can we elaborate on deep-seated 'insider violence' within masculinised hyper-nationalism.

THE 'BENEVOLENT PATRIARCH': ULFA AND THE MISPLACED CASE OF WOMEN'S HONOUR:

In the early days, ULFA's very visible punitive measures for people engaged in 'anti-social' activities often included kneeling down in public places, public stripping and beating. 'Misbehaviour' with women was on top of the list of such activities and the accused would receive severe punishment. As Uddipan Dutta's study (2008) shows-Assamese media would often publicise such retributive acts without any concern for the side of the punished. Why did ULFA assume the responsibility of 'protecting' women-especially when there is little evidence of any harassed women approaching it for relief? Dutta's study further demonstrates however noble ULFA's intention in this regard might have been, it was nothing more than an instance of 'benevolent patriarchy'. Interestingly, there was no difference in the punishment

2 It is noteworthy that even in the context of repression by security forces during Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino, formidable public intellectuals would adopt an almost dismissive attitude towards allegations of sexual violence against women. For instance, Hiren Gohain wrote in 1991 that rustic women must have mistaken other forms of physical assault with rape (*Swadhinatar Sapun aru Dithak*, 1991, p 121-122). Praful Bidwai writing for the *Times of India* (23/12/1990) argued allegations of violence by armed forces were 'highly colourful and improbable-sounding'.

meted out to men guilty of different categories of crimes against women- 'misbehaviour' with women, rape and trafficking. There was no effort on their part to awaken people about problems such as 'eve-teasing'. Even more disturbingly, ULFA chose to remain silent when reports of harassment of female tourists by a minister of the then AGP government or another minister creating commotion in girls' hostels were publicized (Dutta 2008: 70). These incidents show that ULFA's concern about women's safety was superficial at best and display of muscle power to succumb people under fear at worst.

A close reading of Sumita Ghose's *Sanjoy's Assam* (1998) and Santana Khanikar's *State, Legitimacy and Violence in India* (2018) reveal instances of ULFA's indirect violence against Assamese women. The first book narrates the organization's narrowly understood meaning of 'local culture' that had a distinct patriarchal and sexist underpinning. Women who defied its dictate to work with AVARD-NE[3] and wore salwar kameez for convenience was seen as against the 'culture of Assam'. Other activities of the NGO that included importing yarns from outside of the state and manufacturing products that were 'not part of the local milieu' were 'anti- Assamese' in ULFA's definition, which they feared, would result in 'women forgetting how to weave and wear *mekhela sador*'. The president of the local Mahila Samiti was warned to dissociate herself from the activities of AVARD, or else her children could be harmed (p 13-18). The second book offers similar account of ULFA's attempt at construction of Assamese identity and culture through strict monitoring of women's body and movement in Lakhipathar in Tinsukia district. The organization was influential enough in that area to forbid women to cut their hair short and force young girls to wear only mekela sador and not the 'Indian' dress salwar kameez after they grew out of frocks or skirts. In addition, strict boundaries were to be maintained while intermingling with the opposite sex, any lapse would be met with 'beating for boys and chopping of hair for girls' (Khanikar 2018: 180). What M.S. Prabhakara terms as 'cultural fundamentalism' (2012:147) is a characteristic feature of many ethnic agitations in the North-East, including the ULFA. Its insistence on upper caste puritanism meant strict prohibition on practices like consumption of alcohol, even for religious purposes. Its normative construction of the 'good Assamese woman' was heavily influenced by upper caste patriarchal ideals- which meant occupations like selling of home-made country liquor or prostitution were viewed as aberration of good femininity instead of violence against women. This ideal woman is not only the custodian of all virtues; she also has the added responsibility of imbibing these virtues in the future generations (Prabhakara 2012:148-49). Thus, what a 'good woman' should be like in terms of behaviour and attire

3 AVARD-NE the organization Sanjoy Ghosh was a part of did commendable work in the riverine island Majuli. Ghosh's murder by ULFA and its pathetic attempt to cover up the incident is considered one of the main reasons for the organization losing much of its mass support.

constitutes an important component of the perceived identity.

Not surprisingly, ULFA's support base among in Assamese tribal societies was rather limited. The Bodos and Mishings, for instance, viewed it as an organization 'representing only upper caste Assamese' (Baruah 1999:173) and a symbol of upper caste/class authority and domination (Ghose 1998: 19). One expression of this authority was the insistence that 'their women' must dress properly (the insistence that Bodo women must dress in the *dokhona* during the Bodo insurgency was not a coincidence but intentional move to distinguish them from the 'Assamese woman' as Arupa Patangia Kalita subtly notes in her novel *Felanee*), with increasingly diminishing space for individuality and dissent.

REMEMBRANCE THROUGH UNCONVENTIONAL HISTORY WRITING: ULFA IN ASSAMESE FICTIONS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES:

Fictional writings as sources of 'imaginary history' (Roy 2011: 38) and autobiographical writings of women ULFA cadres are vital to explore the issue of 'insider violence' within the organization. Most scholarly and journalistic reporting on the organization have been unusually silent about this phenomenon, lack of reportage may be an important reason for this silence. The realm of fiction, on the other hand, is quite unforgiving while recording the blunders and moral decay within the organization. Interestingly, women are often central characters of such narratives, not as active agents of the revolution, but primarily as mothers, sisters and romantic interests. Women are also central to visualise repressions of both state forces and the rebel organization.

The first novel- *Sanglot Fenla*[4] - is chosen because its author Parag Das is considered to be one of the foremost ideologues of the outfit (Mahanta 2013). His writings were the first attempt at providing a theoretical structure to the demand of an independent Assam, including the economic foundation of the future independent state. As Rakhee Kalita (2009) asserts, this is a kind of narrative that is always struggling for inclusion (p 117), as the overt and covert censorship of the state machinery makes its dispersal rather difficult, if not impossible. Das's writings remained out of print for a long time after his assassination in 1996, and before that most of his writings were confiscated when he was arrested for sedition under TADA. This is a detailed fictionalised narrative of the early days of the organization. This novel is sometimes seen as 'rather partisan' (Gohain 2007:1018), but it also provides a scathing critic of the short-sighted policies adopted by the outfit. It also provides indirect

4 I am using this English spelling from the book cover. Other authors (Kalita 2009) have used different spelling for the title.

references to the normative 'Assamese woman'- presumably worthy supporters of the cause of liberation- through mostly peripheral women characters. They enter the story as mothers, beloved, temptress, sympathisers. *Sanglot Fenla* offers lengthy discourse on ULFA's political and economic objectives, but rarely do we hear a women's voice in these discourses. The only time when a female voice makes an attempt to discuss socio-economic issues is when Diganta's mother urges him to simplify issues raised by ULFA. She says oil and tea gardens are too distant matters for most desperately poor rural people, what they want is land. This account of a woman illustrating her notion of freedom is more of an exception than the norm even within the realm of imaginary history. Diganta's mother however is not Gangee Orain in Utpal Dutt's marvellous play Teer (Roy 2011). With the exception of this one voice, all other female voices are about unconditional support for the men chasing the dream of swadhinata-freedom. Even though ULFA had strict rules about cadres respecting women, it was also almost common sensical which women was worthy of respect. This novel has indirect reference to such categorisation about 'good' and 'bad' women. Bindu Barua, all well connected, rich and beautiful and her daughter are the epitome of everything 'good women' should not be, starting with their choice of attire. She is a sympathiser of the organization, but her support obviously has selfish motives. In an opposite plank stands Anju-Diganta's childhood friend and confidante; and Diganta's mother, the 'good, selfless' women. Incidentally, the latter has no name, she is just the main protagonist's proud mother, who has unwavering faith in her son's dangerous endeavour to freedom. Unlike Bindu Barua who uses the organization to rise up the social ladder, these 'good women' wear their sufferings in the hands of the 'Indian security forces' as a badge of honour.

Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Felanee*- an outright feminist novel- is a tribute to the resilience of poor, ordinary women who try to rebuild their lives after losing everything in various conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s. It is now well established that violence indeed was part of the Assam Movement (Gohain 2017), and later ULFA (Dutta 2008) but its specific impact on women still eludes scholarly attention. Felanee is a documentation of those unrecorded tragedies. It was not obvious forms of violence such as losing close family relations, but the call for long bandhs sometimes ranging up to 100 hours had serious implications for women street vendors and daily wagers. Through the character of Maloti (or Felanee) Kalita portrays a detailed picture of separatist organizations using women's bodies as sites for justifying their demand of separate states.

THE 'SULFA' PHENOMENON AND WOMEN:

Under a state sponsored amnesty scheme, the surrender of ULFA cadres was initiated

in 1992, after Operation Rhino (Nath 2013: 80). While the events leading to the division in the organization and emergence of the surrendered ULFA or SULFA as they came to be known, have been adequately commented on to comprehend the power of the state, the foundational weakness within ULFA, their lack of maturity in initiating armed rebellion for an independent state of Assam without adequate groundwork among the masses (Das 2014, Misra 2001, Mahanta 2013), what has largely remained outside of the purview of scholarly writing is violence against women, a gap filled by fictional narratives to a certain extent. Arun Goswami's *Maithun, Arthot Biddhwasta Swakal* is a telling commentary on insider violence by surrendered ULFA cadres. Though this novel focuses on the unholy nexus of surrendered ULFA, corrupt politicians and police through the character of Prabhat, there are subtle references to ULFA leaders sexual exploitation of even minor girls. There is an allusion to the organization's moral decay when Indrani's mother accuses Prabhat and his associates of taking shelter only in families with young women. She even uses the word 'characterless' (charitraheen) for them after her young daughter is impregnated by Prabhat. Prabhat of course denies the allegation and the text then goes on to describe the depravity of some surrendered members of the organization as 'cancerous growth' within a healthy body.

Anuradha Sharma Pujari's short story 'Surrender' (2020) is another poignant commentary on the everyday violence a woman living with her surrendered militant husband has to experience. Dipok is unable to reconcile to the life of ordinary domesticity after leaving the path of militancy. His wife Sondhya and their little daughter are often the targets of his frustrated anger. An angry Sondhya calls him an 'animal' after he hits at their daughter, a term that reminds Dipok of the wife of the bureaucrat whom he had murdered many years ago. She too had called him a 'savage' sitting near her slain husband's body. In a feat of rage, he hits and possibly rapes Sondhya. Readers can deduce Dipok's depression and psychological trauma from the plot which explain his violent outbursts. However, the sense of hurt to masculine ego for being labelled as an opportunist and betrayer; and the consequent domestic violence remain hidden aspects of the turbulent history of ULFA.

THE MASCULINE REBEL AND THE FORGOTTEN FEMININE:

In all the above fictional narratives, the unmistakable masculine identity of the rebel is striking. The realms of 'imaginary' and 'real' history coincide here, as the rebels were indulgently referred to as 'our boys' at the peak of ULFA's popularity. This seemingly innocent mode of address can also be read as a way to obliviate women's existence and contribution as rebel group members/supporters. The story of Moni in Rita Chowdhury's *Ai Samay, Sai Samay* is the story of one such forgotten rebel. In a remote village of Assam,

Moni's family starts as an ardent supporter of ULFA. Her mother 'gives away' the youngest son of the family to the cause of revolution. Moni wants to join the organization too- she does not want to waste her life in mundane activities, it must be used for the 'good cause'. Moni witnesses her brother's abduction by security forces and later disappearance of her husband Ratan. Her mental health rapidly deteriorates after she is subjected to sexual assault by the Indian army. A mentally ill soldier is of no use to the rebel organization. A battered family is relieved when an old friend marries a pregnant Moni and brings her to Guwahati for further treatment. When Moni asks- what has the Commander in Chief done to avenge the assault on her? She might be speaking for many other forgotten soldiers of freedom.

WOMEN WITHIN ULFA: THE INSIDER'S GAZE:

Unlike other rebel organizations in India and by extension South Asia, biographies or autobiographical narratives[5] of women ULFA cadres are a rarity. So far, only one such memoir has been published, Kaberi Kachari Rajkonwar's *Issa Anissa Swatteu Kisu Katha* (2013). This is not necessarily a feminist text, but is 'intersubjective' in the sense that it presents an 'often shifting, partial and contested set of personal and collective memories'(Roy 2010: 41) and an assertion of the self that struggled to strike a balance between an assumed identity and confrontations emanating therefrom. Rajkonwar's relationship status as the wife of the chairperson of ULFA certainly does not define her, but this relationship remains central in her perspective of the organization. This text is also a reminder of the 'native's aggressiveness against his own people'; and the different forms of violence present within a seemingly progressive organization. A feminist reading of this text reveals an assertion of the self away from the conventional understanding of the devoted wife and homemaker- an assertion through which Rajkonwar demanded a few hours daily for herself. Similarly, the loss of the sense of self is also revealed when her daughter was forced to give up classical dance which was her one true passion.

Similar renderings of 'intersubjectivity' are also visible in the personal narrative of SR[6], who was the first woman cadre to have joined the ULFA in 1989. She wants her life story to be recorded in a book, but denies the possibility of writing it on her own anytime soon. SR is proud of her royal Ahom ancestry, and is not shy of displaying her unique style in terms of dressing and conducting herself. She is not oblivious to her past status as one of

5 Some prominent titles include Stree Shakti Sanghatana's *We Were Making History* (1989), Hisila Yami's *Hisila: From Revolutionary to First Lady* (2021), Tamizhini's (translated by Nedra Rodrigo) *In the Shadow of a Sword: The Memoir of a Woman Leader in the LTTE* (2021).

6 Interview with SR at her residence in Mongoldoi, 05/03/2021. All interviewees are referred to by their initials in this article.

the highest -ranking cadres of ULFA. At the time of her marriage, her future husband was a district commander, ranked lower than her. Her apprehension about the match was assuaged by the feeling that as a woman marriage was a 'necessity'. Her life in a small town in central Assam now is a far cry from the life of the revolutionary. SR is anguished for not being able to provide adequate opportunities for her talented rapper son. She does not have much to say about ULFA or swadhin Asom now, but is critical of the pro-talk ULFA leadership for leaving out the '*biranganas*' (female cadres of the outfit) from the negotiation table.

This lack of adequate representation of women in important historical events of the state constitutes an important section in Rita Chowdhury's memoir *More Asom Jiye Kun* (2021). Chowdhury was one of the few women leaders of the Assam Movement who was imprisoned. She could not formally join the National Guard or the Jatiya Rakshi Bahini that she had organized almost single-handedly because of her father's refusal. The feeling of insignificance that she faced that day, Chowdhury writes, changed her life forever. Women were welcome to participate in the Assam Movement but they were not welcome as leaders or even as equal participants. The first generation of ULFA leaders including Arabinda Rajkhowa received their first lessons on guerrilla warfare from Chowdhury's father B.N. Chowdhury, but he did not think it necessary nor relevant to train his daughter in the same methods, despite her burning desire and obvious aptitude.

After this incident, Chowdhury had almost taken the decision to join one of the revolutionary organizations that were spawning in various parts of Assam at that time. She does not reveal the name of the organization, nor whether she actually followed the path of armed rebellion, but her memoir does expose gendered discriminations within Assamese society and mass politics. Such autobiographical accounts from 'insiders' compel us to scrutinise more closely the question of insider violence within organizations like ULFA.

It would not be out of place to use the framework of 'masculinity nostalgia' (MacKenzie and Foster 2017) to analyse the support base the outfit enjoyed among a section of Assamese men. The perpetual negligence of the Indian state towards Assam (and to the entire North-East region), the Assam Movement and atrocities of the security forces had relegated the civilian Assamese man to a helpless position. Now with the emergence of a new armed outfit, he was in possession of arms as a member of that group. By asserting his authority over women and by possessing arms that gave him a sense of power, the average Assamese man tried to hold onto this 'masculinity nostalgia'. Much like Fanon's (2001) colonized native, who will first manifest his "aggressiveness…against his own people" (p 40), Assamese ULFA cadres first sought to terrorise their own people. Restrictions on women's mobility and personal

freedom, punishing men for violating women's modesty and restrictions on businesses they considered immoral are some examples of such aggressiveness. As "the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler-not of becoming the settler but of substituting himself for the settler" (Fanon 2001: 41), there appears to be little to differentiate the aggression of the former from the latter vis-à-vis women.

During my interviews, it came up multiple times that the 'outsiders' were becoming extremely aggressive in their dealings with Assamese 'boys'. As SN and NS in Kopohowa village in Lakhipathar argued, ULFA was a fitting reply to such aggression, it was because of ULFA that Assamese boys were able to walk freely on the streets of certain towns of Assam. Aggression, in this understanding is a manly quality, the Assamese man gentle by nature was no match for the unwelcome intruder. With its weapons and targeted attacks, ULFA brought back the lost valour of the former. The idea was that in their own sovereign, independent state, Assamese men would never have to bear such humiliation and would be able to assert their authority. DG in Lakhipathar recounts his experiences in army camps with bitterness. The complete lack of power that the ordinary Assamese villager experienced vis-à-vis the armed forces- all of them outsiders, enhanced his feeling of insignificance. Almost three decades later, DG still gets upset recounting the humiliation his mother-SG- had to go through during army operations. That he was completely powerless to help her adds to his bitterness. When asked would the fabled freedom bring similar privileges to women too, the articulate and feisty SN said in an independent state, women would be happy even if they were hungry. Other respondents like AG in Ulup village in Digboi however were not as optimistic. According to her, due to increasing availability and consumption of intoxicants cases of domestic violence were increasing to such an extent that 'only 1% married women could eat their meals in peace'. For her, the more urgent need is to ensure peace in the household primarily for the benefit of the women and not sovereignty. Independence would not bring solutions to such problems unless men were sensitised.

ULFA CADRES AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN:

It is noteworthy that in the special manifesto published on the occasion of ULFA's 10th foundation day on 7th April, 1989 there was no specific mention of women's rights or equality. This manifesto was the first document that revealed the organization's aims, objectives and other details (Nath 2013: 25). The aim was the 'formation of a classless, strong, developed Assam free from all exploitations and discriminations' (Nath 2013: 29). Members committed to the goal of such a society were also capable of extreme violence against women. As the experiences of Tebhaga (1946-50, in four phases), Telengana (1946-

51), and Naxalbari (1967-75) tell us, the idea of a classless society is not a gender -neutral concept (Punjabi 2017, Stree Shakti Sanghatana 1989, Roy 2011). The fictional narratives and autobiographical accounts we mention above point at the masculine biases within the organization and its failure to address gender equality in an effective manner.

In a first of its kind book written in Assamese titled *ULFA-r Kalankit Adhyay* (2020) Ranju N. Hazarika and Amrit Baruah have detailed several instances of atrocities by ULFA cadres especially in upper Assam in the late 1980s and 1990s. ULFA leadership has not denied any of the instances of abuse described in the book at the time of writing. There is the depressing story of two sisters In Lakhimpur district who were repeatedly raped by the then district commander of ULFA, forcing them to undergo multiple unsafe abortions that resulted in the death of one sister. Unable to cope with the tragedy, their father killed himself (Hazarika 2020: 43). One medical doctor of Bihpuria in Lakhimpur district was brutally 'crucified' by ULFA on September 8, 1989 for his refusal to perform clandestine abortions on women impregnated by ULFA cadres (Hazarika 2020: 54-55). The 'lesser' forms of harassment included sudden arrival of cadres in families- often at midnight- and demand that fresh food be cooked for them[7].

To a question on non-reportage of such cases of sexual assault, one respondent answered-"that was a time when DP (the then district commander of ULFA in Lakhimpur) ruled over our area. No one could have reported against him, he would have ensured the most brutal punishment was given to anyone going against him". The respondent then proceeded to offer a chilling account of gruesome atrocities committed on people who dared to go against ULFA. Such accusations are now in the public domain, and from within the ULFA little effort has been made to deny these or issue clarifications. Thus, along with the bureaucratic complexities and social stigma associated with cases of sexual assault, 'fear of the gun' was another important reason to hide such cases (Kikon 2015).

While writing about violence and ULFA, mention must be made of the 'secret killings' (Baruah 2020, Talukdar et al 2009) that shook the state between 1996-2001. These were 'state sponsored weapon' (Talukdar et al 2009: 195) to pressurise ULFA cadres to surrender.

7 One former area commandant revealed that while most cadres would be happy to eat a simple meal, there were others who would demand duck meat as special treat. The whole tedious process of cleaning the duck and cooking were often overlooked. There are other questions associated too- what if the household was dependent on a meagre poultry business, often the bastion of women? One respondent narrated the story of ULFA cadres coming to their house and demanding pork. They were a Vaishnavite family, so pork was prohibited in their household. What horrified her more was the fact that women ULFA cadres were at the forefront of this demand. Would it have been a lesser crime if the demand had come from men- one asks. Not really, but one does not expect such behaviour from women. These are important questions which have so far been addressed only in fictional narrative.

State security forces along with SULFA members oversaw the brutal killings of many close relations of ULFA members-often at the dead of the night (Baruah 2020: 127). There was no monetary compensation to the victim's kin, nor were there any messages of condolences from the government (Talukdar et al 2009: 199-200). In his book *Homemakers Without the Men* journalist Wasabir Hussain recounts the emotional, material and psychological hardships of women who lost their husbands to secret killings. Hemaprova Konwar whose husband Premadhar konwar was gunned down by unknown assailants in 1993, had little to fall back on. She never received the ex-gratia payment from the government, nor was any counselling available for her or her two young sons. She managed to get a job as a primary school teacher three years after her husband's death, but life was never the same for her family ever again (Hussain 2006: 64-70). Others like Amiya Borkotoky whose husband Dulal Borkotoky was kidnapped by ULFA because he worked with the Intelligence Wing of the Assam Police, was informed about his death by a letter a few months later, but the family never saw the body (Hussain 2006: 91). These stories of individual trauma constitute an important chapter in the 'contributory history' (Stree Shakti Sangathana, 1989: 20) of militancy and its aftermath in a society. While it is possible to argue that women like Basanti Sharma (wife of the slain Congress leader Manabendra Sharma) or Ajanta Neog (wife of slain Congress Minister Nagen Neog) received adequate compensation from the state -both of them went on to become elected political representatives- there are many more who were pushed into oblivion.

It is important to record such incidents of violence against women by 'our boys' for two reasons. One, it shatters the myth that "sexual violence is seen as the stuff that the army, paramilitary and police engage in" (Barbora 2016: 74). Secondly, it is necessary to problematize the conventional notion of relatively superior societal position of Assamese women. What Kikon (2015) wrote in the context of Nagaland finds resonance in Assam too- Assamese language, proverbs and idioms reinforce gender hierarchy and the inferior status of Assamese women. There are absolutely demeaning words in the language to denote 'effete' men and 'masculine' women. These expressions assume the form of common sense, thereby contributing to the larger structure of violence against women- so much so that violence is not even recognised unless there is a blatant form of bodily violation involved- as we have seen above in the experiences of Nirupama Borgohain and Rita Chowdhury during the Assam movement.

The problem of female ULFA cadres facing harassment at shelters is yet to be properly discussed. When asked about this, one erstwhile Captain of the outfit AC was specific that such problems never arose. And even if any such occasion had arisen, the perpetrator would

have been given the 'extreme punishment'. Did any ULFA cadre try to misbehave with women in the families they sought shelter in? Perhaps yes, but most of them were quite respectful towards women. What happened to those few who were not? If the leadership got to know about it, they were punished, if not, nothing much happened. It would not be out of place to mention former publicity secretary of ULFA and one of the firsts to surrender SP's caustic remark about leadership in this context- as they were mostly concerned about their own comfort and collecting money for the organization, anyone keeping them happy in these two aspects could do what they pleased without any fear of retribution[8]. Such texts of 'imaginary history' and autobiographical writings by women as we have discussed above reveal the structural violence within a muscular revolutionary organization. It is through such documentations that we realize that "in the struggle of memory against forgetting, there are some things that are vital to remember". It is crucial to keep alive the memory of the young girl in Nagaon who was brutally murdered at the pretext of being an army informer. However, as later investigation revealed the real reason for this murder- the girl had spurned the advances of one ULFA cadre, and defying his orders, had agreed to teach Bihu dance to the daughter of an army officer (Mahanta 2013:185). This murder witnessed widescale protests by ordinary people. From the feminist perspective, it can also be viewed as a revenge murder by a man who could not take no from a woman. In a discussion on the radical subnationalism represented by ULFA if such incidents are forgotten, a dispassionate study of the whole movement will remain illusive.

In conclusion, it may be mentioned that an organization named Terrorist Victim Family's Justice Forum has been at the forefront in the fight to bring justice- and some closure- to families that were subjected to atrocities by ULFA at the peak of its influence, especially in some districts of eastern Assam. Without harbouring any doubt about the noble intention of this organization, one would like to point out certain discrepancies from the feminist perspective. One, there is no woman representative among the executives of this forum, even though a woman writer exposed several instances of ULFA atrocities on the ordinary populace first in her Facebook posts and later in a book. Secondly, the general secretary of this organization has laid out a written plan to completely eliminate terrorism that requires recognizing women first and foremost as mothers. This is a problematic aspect as such rationale can also lead to categorization of women into 'good' and 'bad' as discussed above.

8 Interview with SP at his residence in Guwahati, 09/03/2021.

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