

ULFA: The Mirage of Dawn

by Rajeev Bhattacharyya, HarperCollins,
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The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) has remained the dominant security challenge in Assam for over three decades. The group having experienced the peak of its impact in the 1990s no longer hogs the limelight or the focused attention of the state, media or even the local people. If that is indeed the case, why would someone well-known for the coverage of ULFA and its activities write a book on it in 2023?

Proximity allows intimate insights. Proximity also tends to diffuse objectivity. For this reason, breathless accounts of events in their immediate aftermath often score high on breaking news and low on objectivity. In contrast, Bhattacharyya gave himself the buffer of time and distance to validate his facts and mature his perspective. His book has come when there is hope of lasting peace in Assam and when lessons can be learnt from the futility of violence.

The book is especially relatable for the reviewer, having been involved with the ULFA. It began with the Indian Army's induction into Operation Bajrang and as part of Operation Rhino. The initial period of the induction was characterised by the near absence of any form of 'actionable' intelligence

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on the ULFA. Things began to change only during the second innings during Operation Rhino. It felt like searching for a needle in a haystack and possibly overestimating ULFA's network and strength.

Bhattacharyya's account makes interesting reading, especially because it reflects the reality of the situation very differently. The book suggests that the ULFA was worse off than imagined. In addition to the initial teething issues within the establishment, it was facing trials and tribulations while seeking support from across borders and in the procurement of weapons as well as dealing with the challenges of diseases, fatigue, distrust and death. The ULFA had come close to neutralising itself on several occasions.

The author notes that the rise of ULFA was not only related to a sense of grievance amongst the people of Assam but also to the complete failure of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) to live up to the expectations they had raised before the elections. The lack of trust in this political alternative gave a fillip to the popularity of ULFA, which was seen as a disciplined alternative that could deliver. Bhattacharyya notes that the incompetence and corruption of the AGP were accompanied by its complicit leadership, which was more than sympathetic to the cause of the ULFA. 'Home minister Bhriгу Kumar Phukan participated in several meetings with ULFA leaders at his residence in Guwahati ahead of the departure of the second batch to Kachin' (p. 70).

It does not come as a surprise when the author notes that by the end of 1987, ULFA's parallel government had begun to take shape and by the end of 1990, it was responsible for 113 killings (p. 71), a period that ran concurrent to AGPs rule. It was a matter of time before the army was deployed in a crackdown on the fast-deteriorating security situation.

The author documents the fall in ULFA's fortunes due to several factors. He relates these to weak leadership and the inability to outline organisational objectives. The weakness of the organisation was validated by a failed attempt by the ULFA to ally with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka. The LTTE was 'clearly unimpressed with ULFA'. They saw no advantage in aligning with them. The author echoes this assessment of a seasoned militant organisation like the LTTE. He notes that the 'ULFA's larger-than-life image far exceeded its actual strength'. The founding members of the group had disassociated themselves from it. There was a power struggle within the top hierarchy of ULFA, most prominently between Paresh Barua and Rajkhowa. The military arm of the group completely overshadowed its ideological and political leadership. This further deteriorated into wanton killings and acts of violence, which led cadres and supporters to question the very objectives of the organisation.

Bhattacharyya notes the limited success of Operation Bajrang with the initial forays of the army hitting vacated ULFA camps. He further highlights issues of human rights violations that lead to the alienation of the local population (p. 99).

The author provides intimate details of ULFA's forays into Bangladesh in 1991 and its success in not only establishing business ventures but also successful contacts with Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) officials. This led to the procurement of passports and visits to Pakistan. The author has diligently documented the journey and experience of the ULFA cadres with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Taliban leader. The ISI chose to outsource the responsibility of training ULFA cadres to well-organised terrorist groups. This led to a two-month training cycle that included exercises, firing, espionage, wireless communication and bomb-making. The ULFA used the training facility to train three batches of 40 cadres (p. 113). The arrangement between the ULFA and ISI became a conduit for facilitating the training of other groups as well.

Bhattacharyya documents Operation Golden Bird, a major operation by the Indian Army against ULFA rebels returning after collecting weapons from Bangladesh. He provides a detailed, blow-by-blow account of a series of incidents and the casualties suffered by the ULFA and its supporting terrorist organisations due to ambushes and malaria. He also notes the deficiencies in the conduct of the operation, especially coordination aspects and repeated run-ins with the Myanmar Army personnel.

The operation against the ULFA in Bhutan also receives a detailed description from the author. Operation All Clear, as it was called, became one of the watershed events in the debacle of the ULFA. It involved a coordinated operation conducted by the Bhutanese and Indian armies. The operation was launched after attempts by the Bhutan king to convince the ULFA to cease its activities failed. There are different versions of the casualties and apprehensions after the operation. The Bhutanese reported the capture of 500 AK47/56 rifles, an anti-aircraft gun, 328 other assorted weapons and 1,00,000 rounds of ammunition. General N.C. Vij, the then Chief of Army Staff, gave a figure of 485 rebels killed or captured on the Indian side.

Twenty years after the operation, the ULFA is a much-deflated organisation, pushed into a corner of Myanmar–China border with a vast majority of its functionaries opting for talks with the government. Bhattacharyya assesses a bleak future for the group, which no longer enjoys popular support in Assam. It has split and splintered multiple times. The impact of the group on the politics and social life in Assam remains minimal.

The ULFA suffered a blow in Bangladesh and Bhutan, where its erstwhile camps can no longer operate.

Bhattacharyya's painstaking effort at collecting inputs for the book builds an interesting story that spans years of ULFA's ups and downs. His ability to diligently work his way against obvious odds is rare. Bhattacharyya's observations provide a comprehensive narrative with candid observations across the divide. However, does he succeed in bridging the gap between academic, policy and popular writing?

He possibly does. The book is rich in details and is an excellent reference for anyone wanting to understand the trajectory of ULFA's movement. More importantly, it reinforces the futility of conflict, which, as the case of ULFA suggests, is completely out of sync with the aspirations of the people and the mood of the country.

Bhattacharyya gives a revealing peep into the neighbourhood through ULFA's meandering attempts to seek weapons, support and funding. The book reinforces the importance of maintaining a functional relationship with neighbours despite political differences and the value of unstinting support, as was the case with Bhutan. It yet again brings to the fore the role played by Pakistan to not only stoke the fires inside India. The use of so-called Afghan mujahideen in the past and the exploitation of sympathetic elements in the neighbourhood was and will continue to remain open to exploitation.

The history of militancy in India, and in particular the story of ULFA, has lessons for both the state and the aggrieved. The policy of discarding democratic means of airing discontent in favour of violence seems to be losing ground among the people. Appeals in the name of exploitation and using ethnic and religious distinctiveness as a tool for seeking independence no longer appeal to a large segment of the youth, as it did in the past. As Bhattacharyya says, 'There is precious little articulated by ULFA on Assam's burning issues, except the colonial thesis of the state being stripped dry of its resources by New Delhi, which was repeated at regular intervals.'

Bhattacharyya's book traces a long history of violence unleashed by ULFA. He weaves the narrative diligently, bringing forth ULFA's motivation, contradiction, frustration, anger, disillusionment and ultimately the futility of its lost cause. The book is a valuable addition for students, policymakers, practitioners and readers interested in the violent phase of history in Assam.