

Confronting the State: ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty,
by Nani Gopal Mahanta, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2013,
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India's nation and state building project faces challenges in the North-East because of the simplistic, linear, and development-centric approach that has been guiding it so far. This neglects the mind set and the psyche that is sustaining insurgency and violence in the region. The Indian Union has, undeniably, won the war against the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), and its support base has also reduced to a large extent. Today, movements centering on people's issues have become more popular and sustainable in Assam as compared to the armed groups, which have perennially neglected developmental issues for a dream of independence. However, the secessionist sentiment is still there, as the original issues raised by the ULFA still remain unaddressed. Nani Gopal Mahanta's *Confronting the State: ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty* goes beyond development-centric narratives, and examines the complex nuances and dynamics that sustain the movement. The book is based on the basic premise that ULFA represents a mindset, a suppressed voice, which is deeply ingrained in Assam's psyche. Therefore, ULFA's declining support base should not be seen merely in terms of its numerical strength. It still represents the unmet aspirations of the tribal and ethnic groups of Assam. The author writes that Assam had to fight for its legitimate share from the very beginning—that is, from the time of the creation of the Indian nation state. Whether it was for resource control, the

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protection of identity, the issue of citizenship, or for development, Assam had to fight with the 'mighty Indian state' for justice. ULFA is a medium through which Assam expresses its grievances against mainstream India. ULFA is a mode of protest against New Delhi that has remained insensitive to the demands of Assam since independence.

Having said this, the book argues that ULFA is not the only manifestation of the deeper crisis in Assamese society. An ULFA-centric solution, therefore, will never bring about a sustainable peace in Assam. According to the author, for a durable peace in Assam, three factors require utmost attention: the aspiration of the smaller communities vis-à-vis the greater Assamese identity; the illegal migration issue that threatens the existence of the Assamese nationality; and the issue of human security and human development, in the absence of which the insurgency shall find its most fertile ground in the unemployed, poverty ridden, and underdeveloped economy. The author emphasises on the need for a comprehensive structure that can at least satisfy the basic socio-cultural and economic needs of the diverse communities present in Assam. The book proposes the creation of an 'ethnic council' in state capital, with a proportional representation from each and every community of Assam (pp. 304–08).

Confronting the State consists of 11 chapters. The first two chapters examine the genesis of Assamese secessionism or its quest for a separate identity from a contemporary historical perspective and analyses why, despite having socio-cultural links with India, it embarked on a path of armed struggle. It is argued that, during the freedom struggle, Assamese elite conceived of nationalism not so much in the larger Indian context as in the context of Assam. They were under the apprehension that British domination might be replaced by the domination of non-Assamese Indians over the Assamese. The author mentions that a vague and yet rebellious secessionist tendency developed among a section of the Assamese elite during the pre-Independence period. He believes that this secessionist feeling continued to haunt the Assamese elites even in the post-Independence period particularly because of the insensitivity, ignorance, and prejudice of the central leadership on the issue of the settlement of refugees from East Pakistan, the exploitation of the oil sector of Assam, and the almost abandonment of Assam to advancing Chinese forces during 1962 war. These secessionist feelings mostly remained dormant, but came to the fore on occasion—for example, in the form of the Language Movement in 1960; the Refinery Movement in 1967; the Movement on the issue of the Medium of Instruction in 1972; and the Anti-foreigner Movement in 1979–85, reaching their culmination with ULFA and

other extremist organizations in the 1990s. The earlier movements have acted as predecessors for the violent movements by the ULFA. The author argues that these movements, apart from addressing the issues of illegal migration, brought in some unintended consequences that helped in the legitimization of violent and terrorist techniques, and provided the means through which a new radical group could claim an independent Assam.

In chapter three, based on its activities and mode of functioning, ULFA's metamorphosis has been categorized by the author into five broad phases: 1979–84 (the Emergence and Growth of ULFA); 1985–90 (Stabilisation and Populist Measures); 1991–96 (Indian State strikes back: Operation Bajrang and Rhino); 1997–2000 (ULFA retorts back with terror); and from 2001 onwards, when a marked change comes about in the use of terror tactics by ULFA. Each phase has been discussed at great length in the subsequent chapters. It is argued that the transition of ULFA from 1979 till 2009 cannot be analysed from the exclusive prism of the 'grievances model'. The militant organization started its journey relying on the grievances of the Assamese people against the Centre. However, in the later phase, the organization made substantial compromises on its autonomy, and the reliance on unregulated financial collections alienated the organization from the masses. ULFA has turned to being a yet another emotionally-driven misplaced movement which has failed to address the core issues troubling the Assamese people. After the organization established its permanent base in Bangladesh, ULFA openly sided with the Bangladeshi immigrants. It is of the view that before driving out the so-called Bangladeshis, it is the Biharis, Marwaris, Nepalis and other North Indian people that need to be deported first from the state. The Assamese middle class is becoming extremely critical of ULFA's changed views on the Bangladeshi immigrants.

Five factors are identified by the author for the declining support base of ULFA: (1) the indiscriminate killing of the Biharis at the behest of Bangladesh; (2) support to Bangladeshi immigrants; (3) connivance with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and its support base in Bangladesh; (4) the killing of innocent school students in a bomb blast in Dhemaji; and (5) the support to Pakistan during the Kargil conflict. It is interesting to note that, according to the author, although the rejection of ULFA's demand for secessionism is overwhelming, ULFA is still surviving due to the pride factor, strong anti-India or Delhi Factor, the low level of human and economic development in the state, and the primary help given by neighbouring countries.

Chapter nine critically analyses the Centre's peace process with ULFA. According to the author, the peace efforts attempted so far in Assam can, at best,

be described as efforts made merely to manage situations rather than genuine conflict settlement. There have been six attempts at conflict settlement as far as ULFA and the Government of India are concerned: in 1991, 1992, 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2010. However, the dialogue put forward has been not to solve the conflict but to delay it. While providing recommendations to the Centre, the author reiterates that ULFA should also be seen as an idea—as the hidden psyche of the people of Assam. It should not be considered merely as a physical force. Control over resources and the checking of illegal migration were the twin objectives for which the organization demanded secession of the state from the Indian Union. Though the Assamese middle class today rejects ULFA's secessionist demand, it is still very sensitive about these two grievances. Therefore, the author cautions that, without resolving the issue raised by ULFA, it would be difficult to smash the organization.

The final two chapters focus on Assamese discourse on the issue of migration into Assam from Bangladesh. The Assamese nationalist elites and the organizations are criticised for their exclusionary principles and for ignoring the historical reality of pluralism. The book has identified the severity of the challenges caused by illegal immigrants, particularly on the pressure on cultivable land and identity politics in Assam, yet it refused to deal with the challenges in the line of ultra-nationalistic uttering. The author believes that ultra the nationalist position and the gradual communalisation of the issue will serve nobody except the politicians who will use it for narrow political means. The author goes beyond the nationalistic rhetoric, and suggests a solution that addresses the issue of cultural interaction and co-existence of the immigrants with the Assamese culture, as also the issue of economic development of the border areas. According to the author, the fencing of the border, as emphasized by the dominant nationalist school in Assam, cannot curb immigration. Unless the economic situation of the people in the border region is improved, immigration will continue. Therefore, the book suggests the legalization of border trade in the North-East and Bangladesh, and the North-East and Myanmar sector.

The solutions for the issue of illegal immigration provided in the book are not very novel. These have been discussed and debated for quite some time now among scholars; the book, however, provides a fresh reading on the subject. *Confronting the State* is easily one of the more significant contributions to the rich scholarship already in existence on the problems of Assam. The strength of the book lies in its dispassionate and critical analysis of the ultra-nationalist attitude of the Assamese elite and the armed groups, and the insensitive approach of the Central Government to the psyche of the people of Assam.