

## THE REVOLUTIONARY POETS OF ASSAM

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### Abstract

*The Assam Movement, which started in 1979, led by students of the state against 'foreign elements' led to the formation of two factions of the volunteers. This paper tries to analyse sentiments of the armed faction, The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA,) through their literary works. Banned in 1990 by the Government of India citing them a terrorist organisation, they defined the very meaning of 'Assamese Nationalism' in the most radical terms. In the poetry of ULFA leaders, one can find two very distinct features viz. love for the state and its people plus a very strong Anti-Indian sentiment. The paper will address these sentiments and the reasons for the same while shedding light on the nuances of romanticism so clear in this poetry.*

**Key words:** Assam Movement, ULFA, Poetry, Assamese Nationalism, Romanticism

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- Pratyosh Gogoi

The demand for secession is not one new in any part of the world. Most post-colonial states have a history of this sentiment and more recently, the modern states of Europe are going through a same phase. Born out of secessionist independence, India has seen a lot of demands for secession from her. The struggles in Khalistan, the never ending issue of Kashmir followed by the North-Eastern parts of India- Manipur and Naga Hills, are well known. Finally, Assam also desired either autonomy or self-rule or total independence. That's where the ULFA comes in.

The United Liberation Front of Assam or Sanjukta Mukti Bahini, formed in the Rang Ghar premises on April 7, 1977 has the primary agenda of liberating the territory of Assam from the Indian State through an armed struggle. They argue that Assam was never a part of the Indian republic and was annexed into British India after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 between the British and Burma. Thus, they don't consider their struggle to be secessionist in nature and aim to establish a Swadhin Asom or 'free Assam'.

Although officially launched in 1983, the roots of the organization can be better understood when one goes back in history to the Assam Movement (1979-85). The Assam Movement was one of the biggest events to have happened in the North-Eastern part of India during the previous century. Initially started as a protest to the entry and enfranchisement of "foreigners", it changed the whole geo-political scene of the region. Spearheaded by students, these six years of turmoil changed the state forever. Although meant to be a peaceful protest, a lot of violence was heaped upon the protesters by the security forces including the state

police. It all ended with the Assam Accord (1985) and a 'settlement' was reached upon- one that led to the formation of a new political party, the AsomGanaParishad (AGP), which came to power in the subsequent assembly elections. The ULFA members were the ones who considered the Assam Accord a farce.

They started recruitment from 1983 and enjoyed a very popular support of the Assamese population. However, Operation Bajrang (1990-91) and Operation Rhino (1991-92) deteriorated the strength of the organization to a great extent and they had to move out of the state to Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Subsequently, Operation All Clear (2003) in Bhutan almost broke the backbone of the organization. However, it would be wrong to say that the ideology that the organization stood for was baseless. ULFA as the repository of a particular "idea" has always been more powerful than its actual operational effectiveness. It however is an acceptable fact that the sympathy of the Assamese middle class towards the ULFA is a phenomenon a lot of commentators have found baffling and very hard to explain.

It is a fact undeniable that the ULFA has led to the formation of a new genre of literature in Assamese- one that dwells on the movement and its formation to the life of a cadre; the atrocities committed by the security forces in the state to the ones committed by the militants. Dilip Borah's '*KolijarAai*' was published as a serial novel in the famous periodical of the state '*Prantik*' and told the tale of Chinmoy, a student activist who after the Assam Movement joins the ULFA and subsequently leaves the organization after years working underground. Parag Kumar Das's '*SanglatFenla*' dwells upon the militant life and is considered pro-ULFA. More recently, AruniKashyap's '*A House with a Thousand Stories*' has reignited the never ending debate about the secret killings of 1999-2001.

While a lot of literature has been created regarding the ULFA so far, the angle of literature created by ULFA militants wasn't a part of the larger societal debate. The reason why the literature created by militants themselves is important is solely because they are first-hand accounts of what they went through. A study of their poems will enable one to know the psyche of an ULFA militant. In 2012, Satsori, the prestigious literary magazine edited by Anuradha Sharma Pujari and Diganta Oza, ran a special issue on 'bidroheesahitya' (rebel literature), where former ULFA cadres contributed across genres (Kashyap, 2013). This literature emerges from a very distinct background- one of social, political and personal turmoil. And this is very important

to be noted while reading them. It is the background and the beauty of this poetry that makes them an enthralling read and adds to the value of what the verses mean to convey.

Mamoni Raisam Goswami, one of the barons of modern Assamese literature, has acted as the mediator of a lot of peace talks between the Government of India and the ULFA and when talking of Megan Kachari to AruniKashyap said, “I don’t believe that a boy who can write such sensitive poems is just a bloodthirsty insurgent. There is more to him. I want someone from your generation to try and understand people like him,” (Kashyap, 2013)

“My parents, they were born  
Of the womb of a mongrel bitch,

Lowly, puny.  
And wanted to enter  
Your golden world  
Of laughter  
They served you, till the steps  
Of your house.  
And then... They died.  
Their wealth, of dreams  
Of silver nosepins and gold bangles  
To wear, if in Heaven,  
They even left that  
With you.  
Believe me,  
I am a puny, unlike you.”

*(Silver Nosepins, Gold Bangles; Melodies and Guns, 2006; Translated by ManjeetBaruah)*

Megan Kachari alias MithingaDaimary was the Publicity Secretary of ULFA before he was captured in Bhutan during Operation All Clear (2003). Turmoil came early in his life, when his family was gunned down by unidentified miscreants. His mother, elder brother, sister in law and sister were killed on the same inside their house. His father died of cancer six months later. The pain that he went through is very visible in his poetry and that makes him a stand-out militant poet. With sustained efforts by Goswami, his poems were translated into Assamese and

a book “Melodies and Guns” was released in 2006 while he was behind bars. The interesting fact is that most of the translated poems preceded the publication of their Assamese versions.

There is a distinct ethnic flavor in his poetry and a whiff of optimism. He urges for a change- a change that would take his motherland to a better state than the one he was living in. he has voiced against the depleting democratic ideals and speaks of the atrocities that he has witnessed both personally and otherwise as a cadre.

“The bank, in the dawn  
And far away, in the horizon  
Was the glow of my rising sun.

But where have I lost all?”

*(The Down Stream Song, Melodies and Guns, 2006; Translated by ManjeetBaruah)*

One who wrote with a very vivid imagery, he picked up elements that the people reading could connect to. His poems bring out the harsh but true realities of life when man becomes an alien in his own place. (Pranab Thakur, Melodies and Guns, 2006)

“Look at that colour  
Of the moon!  
As if into its shining face  
Someone poured the red paint,  
The colour of the Hibiscus  
Or of thick fresh blood?”

*(The Beastly Darkness- Light; Melodies and Guns, 2006; Translated by ManjeetBaruah)*

The call for revolution is another aspect that Kachari’s poems dwell into. It was imperative to mobilise the masses in one direction so as to reach the goal. With the socio-political situation of the state at the time, it wasn’t difficult to understand that there was a dissent amongst the people against the government sitting at the center. Kachari used this opportunity, letting out a ‘call’ for people to join the revolution

“I shall pour into your vessel  
This cool, clear water  
And pour into your heart  
My forlorn love far deeper.

And...

I am even busy, sharpening my knife  
To slit open the throat and let loose  
The blood.  
And this water shall be clean no more,  
Anymore.”

*(This Clear Water Pond; Melodies and Guns, 2006; Translated by ManjeetBaruah)*

Or as he urges his comrades to wage a war against the oppressive ruler in the following verses:

“Soon as night descends, all gods fall asleep  
Don't you murder silence yelling for them  
Instead let's join hands and dig a grave  
For all the gods. Let's again declare a war,  
Like people raving mad with the dark night.”

*(Soon As Night Descends; Melodies and Guns, 2006; Translated by PradeepAcharya)*

His poems talk of a silent survival during a time when the identity and breath of a person is forcibly taken away. They also highlight the hardships a militant has to go through due to the choices he made in life. He writes, also, about human feelings of love, joy and sacrifice. However, the most striking quality of his poems is optimism. He sees light ahead of him in the path that he is on. And maybe this optimism for a better, peaceful state made him come to the discussion table with the government. However, Kabiranjana's story is in stark contrast to Kachari's.

Remarkd by HomenBorgohain as a person with a heart torn by 'Hamletian Conflict', KabiranjanaSaikia alias SwadhinotaPhukanwas a brilliant student and a true artist.His first book of poetry "RaktaAaroti" was published when he was 12 years of age. Inclined towards art and poetry since a very young age, he truly embodied the famous saying, "Pen is mightier than the sword". Someone who never picked up a gun, he was the Assistant Publicity Secretary and was an 'over-ground' worker of the ULFA. Neither was he armed nor dangerous. However, under the auspices of JP Singh, who killed 20 suspected militants in the year 2000 under mandate of the government, Saikia was killed in cold blood after being abducted from the house of a doctor where he was taking shelter in Jorhat, Assam. His encounter is considered by many as the

darkest day of the secret killings done by the state government. Not because he was a member of the ULFA who met an extra-judicial, illegal death but because the state had lost a poet of repute and recognition.

In 2011, an anthology of all his poems titled “*MoiKabiranjan, Uttopto Hobo Khuja Eta KobitarNaam*” (*I am Kabiranjan, The Name of a Poem Wanting to Burn*) was published. The collection is divided into four sections, beginning from poems as early as fourth standard, to the ones he never published.

His poems begin with a strong love for his motherland and a sharp critique of things that were going on in the state. As a school student, his thoughts were assorted and he spoke about the beauty of Bohag, glorified the spirit of Lachit Borphukan and Joymoti and dreamt of becoming a great personality. But age and life streamlined his thoughts, and his poems became the mirror of a person tossed into the harshness of life as a member of an armed secessionist group. (Konwar, 2011)

There are a lot of poems he wrote during his early days about nature and particularly about ‘Bihu’. However, he also speaks of a revolution since his very early days.

“O my beloved mother Assam  
In your temple today  
With lighted incense and  
Red hibiscus,  
Higher Education &  
Research Society  
There’ll be blood offering!”

(*RaktaAarti, 1985; Translated by PratyoshGogoi*)

The call for a revolution, though, is more distinct in Saikia’s poems than those of Kachari’s. He talks a lot about the bleak future of the land and its people and tries to use literature as a tool to weave dreams of revolution and thereby change the destiny of Assam. Which would be preceded, of course, by urging people to join the revolution. As he writes in his poem ‘*Aakrosh*’

“My poems have caught flames  
I lie motionless in a corner  
And my whole body  
Gets burnt in the fire

That's around me.

I remain stranded in the darkness  
Through the hole in the wall, I peek  
And see a candle crying all alone.

Thus, in the vast depths of the uncertain future

I lose myself.

The candle illuminated the spaces around me

And asked me-

Have you never dreamt of a new dawn like I have?"

*(Aakrosh, 1987; Translated by PratyoshGogoi)*

The unpredictable life of a revolutionary, the love for people, the dream for a change and screams for a revolution are very vividly visible in his poems. There is an echo of the poet's persona's suppressed desire to return to a peaceful, non-violent way of life. The pleading tone reflects the urgent need. This possibly means the poet is looking for answers ahead of him.

"In my breast let the poems of this revolution reside

Give me a heart-

I want to write poems after this struggle is over

Poems of a new day

Poems of hope."

*(MorHridoy'ruHridoy'otTumakDekhuwaboPaaru, 1997; Translated by PratyoshGogoi)*

The metamorphosis that Saikia goes through during his life, first as a toddler with extraordinary skills in poetry and an inner love for his motherland and then as a member of a banned outfit who's on the run. His poetry that began with love for the nature grew into that of a person conflicted between an armed conflict and his idea of a better Assam. However, he does grow into a man who can accept death of his comrades as he writes remembering fellow ULFA member Pradip Mohan:

"Now I can accept without difficulty

Every day there is news about our deaths in newspapers."



(NitaipukhuriKobita, 1993)

There is a certain amount of legitimacy that comes to a piece of literature through publication. Other than recognition, the ideas and ideals of a writer reach out to an audience and that matters a great deal when it comes to mobilizing the masses towards a cause. It is seen that many periodicals and newspapers were used as a medium by these militants. A lot of Kabiranjan's poems were published in *Saadin*, *AajirBatori*, *Amar Asom* and *AxomiyaPratidin*. On the other hand, the ULFA also ran a newsletter named 'Swadhinata' (Freedom) that was banned by the Indian Government.

Publication meant that the voice reached out to the world outside their camps and these poems actually try to embody their aspirations in simple, straightforward terms. Swaying away from literary diction and use of free verse, which is often termed as declamatory prose, they penned their feelings for the land and their songs of revolution in a language that the masses could connect to and that was the beauty of it all.

There is a huge role that ephemera play when the motive is to engage the imagination of the masses to a common goal. We saw that during the freedom struggle when Bhagat Singh and Rajguru decided not to run and threw flyers after bombing the assembly. Ram Prasad Bismil's "*SarfaroshikiTamanna*" is enshrined in the hearts of Indians as the song of freedom because it embodied the feelings of the Indian populace at that time. The same can be said about the emotions of the Assamese population as Kabiranjan pens down:

"I don't know how my lover, who has been raped, is  
I can say just one thing  
When I meet you once again

That will be the last day of my fight against every king.

I will hug you endlessly.

We shall write with gunpowder on the walls of the courtroom

The song of freedom."

(BhoraPotharHeujTumar, 1994)

The difference between the stories of Kachari and Saikia is that while most of Kachari's poetry was written after he became a militant and was associated with the ULFA, Saikia published a lot of poems during his younger days as a school student. His first collection of poems '*RaktaAarti*' has a lot of poems with a sense of rebellion. This essentially means that the

seed of a revolt was born inside him. He is the perfect example of the ULFA cadre with an ideology- that of a better Assam. His poetry moved from a dream of seeing a better world to the harsh realities of being an insurgent; while Kachari's poems are instilled with pain and imagery that he had seen during his life as an underground militant.

While reading these poems, one can find two very distinct features viz. love for the state and its people and a very strong Anti-Indian sentiment. There is anger, there is love for the motherland and there is revolution. There is an urge to make the voice heard to the oppressor and for that the poet is ready to go to the courtroom. The courtroom will be his stage and 'with gunpowder' he will sing the 'songs of freedom'. The accumulated mentality of the militants and that of the people of Assam from whom they garnered sentimental support echoes from these lines. There is a certain oppression that they believe there is on the motherland from a 'king'. The 'king' has raped the land and these militants are trying to reclaim the pride of their motherland by taking her back from this 'king'. There is a very distinct political and geographic connect to the thoughts leading to this poem which makes it special. It comes from the very famous slogans "*Tez dim, Dekhnidui*" (We'll give blood but not the country) and "*Tez dim, Tel nidui*" (We'll give blood but not oil).

There is a similarity to the rise of the Maoists in Chattisgarh and Jharkhand to that of the rise of ULFA. Other than the idea of secession from the Indian republic, there was a repellant feeling towards the government because of the extent to which the people were conservative about the natural resources that were siphoned out of the state.

Unaware of the human rights violations by the Army in Assam's rural areas, a jingoistic middle class had no inclination to associate itself in any way with ULFA. Their disenchantment extended to the peace process itself (Kashyap, 2013). Of course after Dhemaji (2004) where 13 innocent civilians were killed in a bomb blast during the Independence Day parade, the support that the people of the state gave to ULFA has diminished a great deal. "The Mishing community which had all this while welcomed us with open arms into their villages began to shoo us off with machetes and knives", said ex-ULFA member Mihir Chetia in his book '*Ejon ULFA'r Dinolipi*' (*An ULFA's Diary*). It is this lack of support for the organization that has led to the downfall of the ULFA. It is this reason why Aruni Kashyap was hesitant to dwell upon the poetry of Megan Kachari when requested by Mamoni Raisam Goswami. The struggles that the people were going through because of the conflict between the militants and the security forces

were immense. Students had to leave the state for studies, every second day there'd be an 'Assam Bandh', there was Section-144 imposed in various districts every now and then and the state had to go to the brink of President's Rule.

It's imperative that when violence enters the modus-operandi of any movement, the ideology gets lost somewhere. And that's exactly what happened with the ULFA. It began with a strong moral support from the people of the state but after its acts of brutality and prolonged violence, it has lost the stronghold that was enjoyed in the last decade of the previous century. What the ULFA has given Assam or taken away from her, the answer that was plausible ten years ago isn't plausible now ten years ago, what would have been true for militants in the camps of ULFA isn't something that the members of the organization now would accept (Jogi, 2011)

It is widely accepted that the ULFA has moved away from its ideology to a great deal and hence have lost its stand in the contemporary Assamese society. However, there is more to the organization, rather than some zealots blinded by the red fire of revolution. And Megan Kachari and Kabiranjana Saikia's poems tell us what went into the making of this revolution in a very unadulterated manner. Something that's fresh from the camps within the jungles or the confines of a dark room while on the run from the security forces.

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