

# ULFA

(UNITED LIBERATION FRONT OF ASSAM)

A POLITICAL ANALYSIS

SAMIR KUMAR DAS

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The book only of its kind in English language, discusses the politics of ULFA (The United Liberation Front of Assam) in the light of the larger problem of state's abdication of the responsibility of building the nation in India. It analyses economic, political and ideological backgrounds and their conjunction that led to the emergence and persistence of ULFA over the years and presents in brief, a biography of it since it was born in 1979 and till the end of 1991. The book also evaluates the attempts at appropriating the theoretical and political practice of ULFA made by two of the dominant discourses of our times : nationalist on the one hand what may for want of a better term be called, globalist on the other. It at the same time turns our attention to one of the most neglected dimensions of social analyses—the assertion of the Assamese community. The present exercise follows the newly evolved method of discourse analysis and draws from original—mostly the Assamese sources.

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## UNITED LIBERATION FRONT OF ASSAM

A POLITICAL ANALYSIS



SAMIR KUMAR DAS



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## PREFACE

The main aim of this book is to analyze the politics of ULFA in the light of the larger problem of the state's abdication of the responsibility of building the nation in contemporary India. Viewed thus, it is predominantly a theoretical exercise. We would do well to remind ourselves that a generally poor level of theoretical awareness on the part of the researchers working on the north-eastern region with, of course, a few notable exceptions, does not go unnoticed in academic circles. Besides, the rapidly changing political scenario of Assam always makes a researcher's job both difficult and challenging. In Social Sciences, accepting the challenge rather than tackling it effectively is very important. Asking the right kind of questions and not necessarily finding the right kind of answers is to my mind the crux of political inquiry.

This book is primarily a product of some of my consecutive field-trips to Assam during 1989-1992. At the outset, I thank the authorities of Assam House, Calcutta, for helping me in having a safe and prolific tour in the summer of 1989.

I am particularly indebted to Prof. Hiren Gohain of Gauhati University, Shrimati Nirupama Borgohain, an eminent novelist and Asomiya literateur, Prof. Apurba Kumar Baruah and Dr Manorama Sharma, both of North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong; Prof. Prasanta Ray of Presidency College, Calcutta; Prof. Amalendu Guha, formerly with Centre For Studies In Social Sciences, Calcutta and Mr Anjan Ghosh, now at Michigan State University, USA for having enriched me in many ways on numerous occasions.

I thank Shrimati Loora Ray for collecting some of the materials actually used here and thereby saving my time and Shrimati Neeta Chowdhury, our M.A. student, who serves as a living bridge between me back in Calcutta and Assam, my field of interest. I also take the opportunity of placing on record my sincere thanks to Shrimati Lakshmi Mukherjee, Assistant Librarian, Assamese Division, National Library, Calcutta, for rendering valuable bibliographical assistance and sometimes going out of her way in doing so.

My thanks are particularly due to that rare or nearly extinct species of human beings who are in the know of, or better say, in the thick of things (for they practise what they profess) relating to ULFA and who have agreed to give me interviews only on the condition of anonymity. They are the people who in these hard and self-seeking days still subscribe to a philosophy of selfless commitment.

Finally, let me acknowledge my debt to 'Political Theory & Indian Politics' study group for giving me the opportunity of shuffling and clarifying many of my views on ULFA. In fact, Chapter IV grew out of some of my raw and very tentative thoughts that I had rather hesitantly placed before the group. Its extremely informal and uncharacteristically stimulating intellectual atmosphere and the willingness shown by its participants to traverse some of the unconventional if not unfathomed frontiers of Social Sciences, thanks to the endeavours of Shri Sanjeev Mukherjee, my colleague, at least made us bold and forthright.

I am alone responsible for the arguments, conclusions and of course, lapses if any, of this book.

*Calcutta,*

*Samir K. Das*

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### I

There is a rich and growing body of literature dwelling on the nature of the relationship between State and Nation in Contemporary India. In most of the early writings on political development, the state has been looked upon as the paramount, if not the exclusive vehicle of political development (for all practical purposes, made synonymous with nation-building). This is equally true for countries where the formation of a nation is yet to become a 'reality' and therefore, nation-building continues to be a 'potent objective' — I mean the countries of the so-called third world.

The early euphoria with the state as the nation-builder par excellence gradually began to crumble since the mid-seventies. In most of the developing societies, the performance of the state in building the nation has been poor and dismal. so much so that the trend today is clearly towards nation-destroying rather than nation building.<sup>1</sup> The state has belied all our aspirations once reposed on it :  
'...the state has ceased to fulfil the roles assigned to it.'<sup>2</sup>

In simple terms, the Indian state is seen to have *abdicated* its responsibility of building the nation in any of the following ways or in any combination of them. First, it may 'align' with any 'dominant' ethnic community. It could for instance, be an Indian state 'aligning' with the so-called 'Hindi-Hindi heartland' — a thesis that is presently put forward by a number of serious-minded commentators.<sup>3</sup> The assumption here is that the task of nation-building implies that the state is — or in case, it is not, has to be — above the

contending ethnic communities. Secondly, the state might keep *all* the relevant ethnic communities at its margins. For instance, neither the Assamese nor the Bengalis (euphemistically called, *bahiragatas* or outsiders), up in arms against each other during the Assam movement of 1979–85, ever identified themselves with the Indian state. To each, the state remained ‘an alienated essence’ of its ethnicity. To an Assamese, the Indian state is anti-Assamese as much as it is anti-Bengali to a Bengali. Everyone’s sense of identification with the state is abysmally low and fragile. The state, in other words, is perceived in mutually hostile terms.<sup>4</sup> A state, *ambiguously* ethnic in this sense, is hardly poised for building the Indian nation. Thirdly, the enterprise of building the nation is thought to be critically dependent on the state’s ability to make and subsequently, maintain a distinction between the nation and others (*viz.* the foreigners).<sup>5</sup> The Indian state, in Assamese perceptions, has failed in making this distinction, let alone maintaining it and putting a stop to the almost unlimited flow of immigration from across its borders. As a result, the Assamese are constantly haunted by a nagging fear of being swept away by the foreigners and losing their identity and culture.

Why do we say that the Indian state has abdicated its responsibility of building the nation? One argument, nevertheless an old-fashioned one, attributes it to the state’s inherent inability to do so. For Kothari, the question of building the state is strategically prior to the question of building the nation. A state that seeks to integrate a whole diversity of ethnic communities into the framework of Indian nationhood has itself to be ‘an integrated political framework’:

The task now was to construct a stable political framework and to integrate the enormous diversity of a segmented

society into this framework... It was nothing more than building a modern state with new *modi operandi* for evoking allegiance and loyalty and incorporating them in a solid self-sustaining structure. The makings of a *nation* were, of course, there, but these had to be institutionalized into an integrated framework of a state.<sup>6</sup>

The foundations of such a state endowed with a willingness as well as an ability to build the nation were laid down during the first two decades of Indian Independence. Since then however, there has been a rapid 'erosion' of the authority of the state.<sup>7</sup> The lesson of this argument is simple: it was no longer possible for the state to undertake the historically assigned responsibility of building the Indian nation.

Another argument with a sharply distinct emphasis, points out that the ethnic question in India is such that it defies any solution within the given framework of the prevalent state. Thus, it is no wonder that the Indian state is today buffeted by the whirlwind of 'politicized ethnicity'. It is further argued that the question can be settled only beyond the purview of the present-day Indian state or even by consciously undoing it. A 'Socialist India', as Hiren Bohain puts it, is the only answer to India's tangled nationality question.<sup>8</sup>

What responses does abdication on the state's part elicit from the relevant ethnic communities? Here we may refer to two paradigmatically divergent types of responses from the ethnic communities in question.

First, the community may seek to make the state do what it does not otherwise do, that is to say, build the nation. The following is an illustration of this type drawn from the

history of Assam movement (1979–85). It is, for instance, argued:

The basic fact of the Assam movement is that the people of Assam are fighting an all-India battle for autonomy single-handed ... the people of Assam are much wiser; they know fully well that for them there can not be India if there is no Assam. They are fighting for Assam in order to preserve India.<sup>9</sup>

Such a response, as I have elsewhere argued, shares in the normative consensus about the state. Here, legitimacy *per se* of the state is never put to questioning.<sup>10</sup>

This type of responses is certainly not confined to the case of Assam, cited above. D.L. Sheth, for instance, tackles the issue at a more generalized level:

The state and the movements, however, often do not work in tandem. On the contrary, through political and social mobilization of populations, often on issues of rights, the movements seek to compel the state — which is guided primarily by the reason of governance rather than of transformation — to adopt policies and enact legislation which, left to itself, is not inclined to pursue.<sup>11</sup>

Another type of responses consists in questioning the moral authority of the Indian state to rule over the concerned ethnic community/ies. Thus, state's exhortations to be 'Indian' (rather than anything else) are regarded as 'moral blackmail against anyone — women, untouchables, Biharis, poets — who wish to articulate some particular interest'.<sup>12</sup> Any state, as we all know, has painfully to put up

with such an eventuality and no state on earth can hope to be perfectly immune from it. But in India, such eventualities are by no means rare. Nor are they always kept within the bounds of what the state considers to be its tolerable threshold. They are widely reported in the 'national' press.

Shortly after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination and before his elevation as Chief Minister, Laldenga had the following exchange with the press in New Delhi, the city where rests the authority of the state:

Q : What is Mizo National Army (MNA) up to?

A : Every sovereign state has to have an army. It is our muscle power – the army wing of the MNF, and I am its president.

Q : How do you recruit soldiers?

A : As you do in the Indian army.

Q : What are your sources of finance?

A : We collect taxes like any government does.

Q : What would you call your government — a parallel government or ...?

A : No, ours is a sovereign government.<sup>13</sup>

Legitimate monopolization of the instruments of coercion and prerogative of taxing the subjects are universally accepted as the *differentia specificis* of any state irrespective of space and time. Laldenga's interview questions the authority of the Indian state on both of these counts. Such a downright defiance is evident albeit in a more intense manner, in the following proclamation of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale:

I do not want to rule. I would like the  
Sikhs to rule; rule Delhi, rule the world:

*Raj Karega Khalsa, baaqi rahe na koe ...*

In the next ten years, the Sikhs will get their liberation. That will definitely happen.<sup>14</sup>

The difference between the two above quoted statements of Laldenga and Bhindranwale should not escape our notice. While Bhindranwale's messianic vision does not stop short of ruling the world, Laldenga's dream is confined to Mizoram or at its best, what he somewhat lovingly called, Greater Mizoram.

Politics of ULFA, to our mind, is an illustration of the second type. Hence, it falls in line with the politics of Laldenga and Bhindranwale (of course with many other differences) rather than that of the Assam movement under the leadership of AASU-AAGSP combine. Nothing short of complete secession of 'Assam' from the Indian Union will satisfy ULFA and its consistent anti-statism is what characterizes its politics throughout the decade of '1980s.

## II

Most of the contemporary writings in the field under review do not sensitize us to the problem of abdication. In most of them, the image of the state 'with a predominantly colonial desire to characterize, control and define the cultural space of 'Indianness' finds expression in multiple forms'.<sup>15</sup> This desire correspondingly 'preempts' what Gyanendra Pandey would call, 'the fragments'—the smaller religious and caste communities, tribal sections, industrial workers, activist women's groups—all of which might be said to represent 'minority' cultures and practices which have been expected to fall in line with the 'mainstream' ('Brahmanical, Hindu, Consumerist, nation culture').<sup>16</sup> This

is what gives birth to a 'seamless and totalizing' nationalism actively sponsored and aggressively propagated by the cohorts of the Indian state:

At the present juncture in India, however, the totalizing standpoint of a seamless nationalism that many of us appear to have accepted as social scientists and historians, seems especially inappropriate.<sup>17</sup>

The 'seamless and totalizing' nationalism is 'inappropriate' in two rather complementary ways. On the one hand, this is what enables the state to ascend to the much-vaunted hegemonic position. 'The most prominent feature of the Indian political culture in recent years has been the emergence of the nation-state as the hegemonic actor in the public realm'.<sup>18</sup> Never before in Indian history has the state been the vanguard of such a messianic nationalism. On the other hand and almost in the same vein, the hegemonic state, in the name of ostensibly advancing universality and rationality, actually helps in 'disorienting' the smaller cultural identity-groups and ethnic minorities.<sup>19</sup>

However, the mega-project of nation-building initiated and sponsored by the state does not go unheeded for long as the affected ethnic communities do not always meekly submit to what is meted out to them: ...the ideology of state handed down to the first generation of third world leaders has come under some stress in recent years even in societies like India...!<sup>20</sup> In other words, the new awareness that the ethnic communities are seen to be imbued with, is often taken to be a *reaction* to the mega-project of building the Indian nation at the expense of 'disorienting' and obliterating them.

We have three major objections to this stream of researches. First, most of these researches, if not all, sensitise us either to the problems the state faces while building the nation or the dangers involved in the enterprise as seen from its impact. They do not question the centrality of the state in building the nation. To us, ethnic problems are not only a consequence of the state's project of building the nation but also a response to the state's abdication of the very project. Viewed in this light, ethnic problems are as much an *antecedent* to the project in question. The politics of ULFA, as we will see later, is predominantly a response to the state's abdication rather than anything else.

Secondly, all these researches project the image of an explicitly hegemonic state. The connection between state hegemony and nationalist ideology has been worked out by Gramsci himself with reference to modern Italian history.<sup>21</sup> If we argue that the Indian state has abdicated the task of building the nation, then we have also to admit that a nationalist ideology is no longer an instrument of state hegemony. We plainly dispute the thesis of state hegemony.

Thirdly, most of these writings speak of a civil war (State versus the Community). The idea of a civil war, to my mind, is far too simple to account for the complexities immanent in the composition of a community.

### III

In this section, we propose to elaborate three main elements of our analytical framework: the state's *abdication*, *non-hegemonic* state and *complex* ethnic community. Each of them is, however, wedded to the above mentioned objections and deserves a closer examination.

Let us refer to one of the primary methodological principles enunciated by Anovar Abdel-Malek for

conducting inquiries into the problem of nation-building in the three continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America:

Our starting-point might seem paradoxical, for it is nothing less than the *non-existence* in scientific terms, of *any homogeneous group* of nations capable of constituting a category of so-called 'new nations'. It is obvious that the tri-continental nations (of Asia, Africa and Latin America, SKD) are neither Western type welfare states, nor highly industrialized socialist national formations, as in Eastern Europe.

Indeed, we may go a step ahead to argue that the nation is not only 'non-existent' but holds out little prospect of being gelled even in future. For the state, that is the only catalytic agent lodged at a vantage point for building the nation, abdicates the enterprise.

If we argue (as does Gramsci) that the nationalist ideology is crucial to a state's exercise of hegemony and that the Indian state is one that abdicates the task of building it, then we have to admit that we have a state that can seldom be called hegemonic in character. A non-hegemonic state, in more positive terms, may be taken to mean, what we earlier designated as a *minimal state*<sup>23</sup>. A minimal state, first of all, is one that has already abdicated the task of building the nation. Secondly, it includes an institutionally *loose-ended* state. Its institutions fail to produce the desired harmony. Indeed, many of the state's institutions are at loggerheads with each other. Again, the strategies adopted by the state have not only been mutually inconsistent but also at times not properly geared to the objective of nation-building. Besides, the state at the moment of crisis has largely been unable to cope up with its personnel, not

only placed at lower echelons of bureaucratic hierarchy but also at upper ones.<sup>24</sup> Thirdly, that the northeastern region in general and Assam in particular have undergone frequent reorganizations and restructuring reflects the organizationally fluid character of the Indian state. A state that is unable to establish itself as a stable organizational contrivance is a contradiction in terms and we treat it as the final indicator of a minimal state.

A non-hegemonic state is sometimes equated with a 'repressive' state. The distinction between hegemonic and repressive states is rooted in Gramsci's dichotomy between hegemony and repression ('domination'): '...the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as "domination" and as "intellectual and moral leadership". A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to "liquidate" or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups'.<sup>25</sup> Dipankar Gupta, for instance, thinks that the hegemonic state is only 'one of the many options' rather than an 'essential cohort of a capitalist system of production'. The Indian state, according to him, is 'surely not hegemonic' and hence, gives credence to an utterly 'repressive' state.<sup>26</sup>

Our contention here is that a state that is loose and fluid, is ill-equipped to turn itself into a *fully* 'repressive' one. It precisely lacks in those institutional and organizational means that can make it so. In other words, its exercise of violence, coercion and repression is likely to be haphazard and erratic and shall be devoid of what in contemporary social and political theory is called, a discourse. To borrow Gupta's language that he has used in a different context, the exercise shall not be 'cerebral', so to say. The moral defence of such a state in favour of violence, coercion and repression unleashed and perpetrated by it shall be extremely fragile. In Nandy's words, 'There is a

latent awareness in many of those directly engaged in fighting terrorism that state violence has its limits and by itself cannot solve the problem of terrorism'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the Indian state unlike, for instance, the Nazi state, is incapable of elevating its repression to the levels of ethical plausibility. If it is repressive it is minimally so, bereft of the required moral fervour.

Finally, if we argue that the mega-project involves a 'disorientation' and disarticulation of smaller communities and ethnic minorities and find that the latter are increasingly becoming restive and militant, we bring in the metaphor of a civil war between the state and these communities. Such a metaphor envisages the pristine, idyllic and homogeneous character of these communities situated as it were, beyond the domain of state power. For us, this is a romantic idealization of what has come to be known as 'primitive rebel'.

Today, we can hardly conceive of a community lying beyond the operations of state power. State itself being a political machine that always acts as a differentiating force, contributes to and accelerates the process of internal differentiation of the community.<sup>28</sup>

All this calls for a reconceptualization of the community in Indian politics in order to dispel the confusions and misunderstandings that seem to surround it. We choose to define it as a *site* of struggle. Viewed in this sense, the community in Assam can be defined in two more or less mutually distinguishable senses. In the more inclusive sense, it can be defined as a body of people – either the Assamese or the Bengalis that the social mobilization during a movement brings into existence. The body, thus mobilized, represents a certain *supersession* of the differentiation along say, caste, religious or even class lines, internal to itself. Hence, the community serves as the

lowest common denominator that seems to cut across the differentiations, that we have in mind. For instance, the perceptions of the community can be those of an yet indeterminate middle class serving its interests; but they are still the perceptions of the community at large in the sense that the entire community irrespective of class differentiations comes to share them at that particular period of time. Conversely, at another, the middle class may either voluntarily subscribe to the perceptions of the general masses or people, lower down and ultimately turn out to be one of their most vocal spokesmen (the case of declassé intellectuals) or even be compelled to submit to them much against their will.

In the exclusive sense, a community is a socially mobilized body relatively autonomous from the hegemonic influences of a middle class. Viewed thus, a community possesses two notable characteristics. First, it has to be distinguished from a nationality. While community as a mobilized body can retain an amount of autonomy from the hegemonic influences of the middle class, the nationality not only cannot retain it but is precisely forged at their instance. Secondly, since the community is a socially mobilized body involved in politics, it has to define and redefine the boundaries continuously depending on the exigencies of the political situation.<sup>29</sup> Hence, to define community as *essentially* a linguistic tie or for that matter, any primordial tie is to fall into the empiricist trap.<sup>30</sup>

#### IV

This section is a brief statement of the method and sources of data. Very unlike the common run of empirical-behavioural researches, the present exercise follows the method of *discourse analysis* and delves into the primary sources of data.

The purpose here is to review the connection between evolving notions of structure or, for that matter, social structure and literary analysis, more particularly, discourse analysis. By evolving notions of structure, we will primarily refer to a shift from a view of structure held by such social scientists as Levi-Strauss, Edmund Leach and Maurice Godelier, who by their own admission or by the recognition accorded to them are known as structuralists, to a view of structure espoused by such philosophers as Michel Foucault, Paul Rocoer, Pierre Macherey and Roland Barthes, who are otherwise known as post-structuralists.

Let us first of all examine the connection between structuralism and literary analysis.

Structuralism seems to have dominated the intellectual worlds of Britain, the U.S.A. and Western Europe from the late 1950s to early 1980s. During the 1980s, it seems to have lost much of its impetus.

What, according to structuralists, is meant by (social) structure? Levi-Strauss introduces his discussion by way of explicitly distinguishing himself from the run-of-the-mill empiricists for whom, writes Levi-Strauss, structure is 'an ensemble of social relations' (like Family, Civil Society, State, etc.). Social structure, for him, is not 'an ensemble of social relations' but 'a model built after it'. In Chapter XV of his *Structural Anthropology*, he defines structure in these terms:

We can say that a structure consists of a model meeting with several requirements.

First, the structure exhibits the characteristics of a system. It is made up of several elements none of which can undergo change without effecting changes in all the other elements.

Second, for any given model there should be a possibility of ordering a series of transformations resulting in a group of models of same type.

Third, the above properties make it possible to predict how the model will react if one or more of its elements are submitted to certain modifications.

Finally, the model should be constituted so as to make immediately intelligible all the observed facts.<sup>31</sup>

To paraphrase the above excerpt, the four prerequisites of structure are: synchrony, isomorphism, predictability and intelligibility. Since the first and the third (which is a corollary to the first) are self-evident and do not require any elaboration, I choose to concentrate on the second and the fourth.

It was Harold Gould who in his paper entitled 'Toward a 'Jati Model' for Indian Politics' takes pains to show how the way Indian society is patterned into numberless jatis and undergoes transformations is isomorphic to the way Indian political system is patterned or for that matter, undergoes transformations. To say that Indian society and Indian political system are isomorphic to each other is not to say that they are identical as much as the right hand is isomorphic to, but not identical with, the left hand.<sup>32</sup>

The fourth prerequisite of a structure is intelligibility. In simple terms, structure is what lends intelligibility to a whole diversity of observed facts. A structure, viewed in this sense, cannot be anything but an idea, a principle or, what Levi-Strauss would say, 'a limited number of principles'. The Greek root of the word "idea" refers to a pattern, a configuration or a structure. He holds

on to this notion of structure even as late as in 1979 when in his Massey Lecture, he says:

(Structuralist approach, SKD) is the quest for the invariant, or for the invariant elements among superficial differences.<sup>33</sup>

Maurice Godelier, one of his illustrious disciples, argues that this is where Levi-Strauss seems to be in perfect agreement with Karl Marx and this is what distinguishes both Levi-Strauss and Karl Marx from 'functionalist empiricists':

...let me recall ...(a) methodological principle which opposes Marxism and structuralism to functionalist empiricism, namely, that what is visible is a *reality* concealing *another* deeper reality, which is hidden and the discovery of which is the very purpose of cognition.<sup>34</sup>

In simple terms, both Levi-Strauss and Maurice Godelier believe that the principle or the 'limited number of principles' that make the diversity of observed facts intelligible to us are discoverable. In his *Structural Anthropology*, Levi-Strauss treats structure as a method of social analysis. Edmund Leach, borrowing an illustration from Bertrand Russell, has sought to demonstrate how structuralism can serve as a method of social analysis:

By way of illustration, I shall borrow an example from Bertrand Russell. If I listen to a broadcast version of a piano sonata the music has gone through a whole series of transformations. It started out as a score written on a piece of paper; it was interpreted in the head

of a pianist and then expressed by movements of the pianist's fingers; the piano then produced a patterned noise imposed on the air which was converted by electronic mechanisms into grooves on a gramophone record; subsequently other electronic devices converted the music into radio frequency vibrations and after a further series of transformations it eventually reached my ears as patterned music. Now it is perfectly clear that *something* must be common to all forms through which the music has passed. It is that common something, a patterning of internally organized relationships which I refer to by the 'word structure'.<sup>35</sup>

Thus for instance, that 'we do not hesitate to throw refuse out of our courtyard onto the street standing on the balcony and that 'the Indians defecate everywhere—beside railway tracks, on the hills, the river banks, the streets' and Santhals refuse to accept food from the Brahmins<sup>36</sup> or that the women in South India during their monthly periods are not allowed to enter the kitchen and cook food speak of a diversity of observed facts but each one of them has to do with a perceived dichotomy — rather a principle that dichotomizes the pure and the impure. For Levi-Strauss, this principle (that dichotomizes the two) is universal in the sense that no society can do without it. In that sense, the structure of these observed facts lies in the principle of dichotomy between the pure and the impure.

What bearing does this definition of structure have on literary analysis? Levi-Strauss and his associates assume that all literary works are a duplication of the structure

underlying them and the object of any literary analysis is precisely *a duplication of the duplication*, that is to say, 'a return to the structure that reposes within the work'. Hence, literary analysis is both 'reductive' and 'repetitive' because it boils down to the underlying structure and 'repetitive' because it is 'another way of saying what has already been said'. The last point requires a little bit of clarification. If structure is universal and knowable (in case, it is not already known) and if any literary work is no more than a duplication of the structure, then literary analysis of the work is possible long before it is written. As Pierre Macherey observes, literary analysis of the structuralist variety 'enables the work to be read before it has been written'.<sup>37</sup>

As I have already noted, structuralism began to lose its impetus by the turn of the 1970s. Most of the post-structuralist writings, though published in French in the decade of the 1960s, were translated into English only during 1970s.

All of them sounded two relevant points of departure: first, relating to the notion of structure; and the second, relating to the notion of social transformations.

The verb 'to structure', as we all know, is transitive. In case of transitive verbs, the emphasis is laid not on the subject, that is to say, what lends intelligibility to observed facts but on the *objects* that are said to have constituted the structure. There is nothing inherent in these objects that drives them to come together to constitute a structure. Rather, they are held together by an element of what Partha Chatterjee would call, 'force'.<sup>38</sup> Thus, according to Pierre Macherey:

From without ... structure is which dispossesses the work of its false interiority, its secret cause, revealing

the basic defect without which it would not exist.<sup>39</sup>

The point that should not escape our notice is: what Levi-Strauss calls, 'a principle' turns into a 'false interiority' in the post-structuralist notion of a structure.

The second point of departure marked by the advent of post-structuralism relates to the notion of social transformations.

Structuralism either does not grapple with the phenomenon of social transformation at all or does so only inadequately. We have already referred to Levi-Strauss's theory of social structure. The structure, to Levi-Strauss, is not only 'universal' but 'invariant'. Hence, it appears that his theory of social structure is insensitive to the phenomenon of social transformation.

But there is reason to think that structuralism does bring in the issue of social transformation in the sense that social transformation, according to this theory, refers to what I elsewhere called, 'discontinuity of social structures'.<sup>40</sup> Social transformation, in other words, can be defined as a transformation from one social structure to another. But anyway, it fails to account for the phenomenon. Maurice Godelier says that Levi-Strauss is not unaware of the problem but has not tackled it. On the other hand, this failure to account for transformation from one structure to another, according to Jacques Derrida, represents 'an ahistoricism of a classical type'. He writes:

More concretely in the work of Levi-Strauss it must be recognized that the respect for structurality, for the internal originality of the structure, compels a neutralization of time and history. For example, the appearance of

a new structure of an original system, always comes about – and this is the very condition of its structural specificity – by a rupture with its past, its origin and its cause. Therefore, one can describe what is peculiar to the structural organization only by not taking into account in the very moment of this description, its past conditions: by omitting to posit the problem of transition from one structure to another, by history between brackets.<sup>41</sup>

None of the available analyses on contemporary Assamese politics, as we will argue, is able to account for the transition from the kind of politics spearheaded by AASU–AAGSP combine during the Assam movement of 1979–1985 to the kind of politics unleashed by ULFA. The transition has remained what I will call, an unexplained riddle. This is surely an ahistoricist fallacy.

Post-structuralist notion of structure brings into play a new genre of literary analysis viz. Discourse Analysis. Here, we may look into only two of its basic postulates.

First, a discourse is distinguishable from a text. Discourse analysis, in other words, hinges on a distinction between a text and a discourse. A text is plural in the sense of having a plurality of meanings. That does not, of course, mean that it has ambiguity built in itself once and for all. Rather, it means that the signifiers embodied in a text convey different meanings to different readers at the same time as much as they convey different meanings to the same reader at different times. In other words, discourse analysis handles the issue of the relationship between signifiers and signifieds or what we called meanings as ‘an open question’.

Let us have a look into the first possibility where the same signifiers convey different signifieds to two very different groups of people at the same time. Kurmis, for instance, inhabiting the bordering areas of West Bengal and Bihar project themselves as kshatriyas, the second in the Varna hierarchy, while they are still regarded as their kinsmen by the neighbouring tribal groups like the Santhals, Mundas, Bhumijis and Kodas, etc.<sup>42</sup> S.K. Acharya gives a number of such instances from northeastern India where there has been a disjunction between the endoethnonym, or self-identification and exoethnonym, the identification accorded by others.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, we can see how the same signifiers (those of ULFA, for instance) convey divergent meanings to the same social group (the students, for instance, sympathizing with the ULFA). As we will see later, the way Mrinal Kumar Saikia, a Final Year student of Gauhati University interprets albeit sympathetically the theoretical and political practice of ULFA is not in conformity with many of the 'authentic' documents handed out by the organization itself.

If the text is considered to be plural or what in discourse analysis is called, polysemic, a discourse, very unlike the text, is unitary for it gives us only one meaning. As Paul Ricoeur defines it:

A discourse consists in a series of *choices* by which certain meanings are selected, others excluded. This choice is the counterpart of a corresponding trait of the system – constraint.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, we may say that if Valmiki's *The Ramayana* is polysemic, then Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghnadbadh Kavya* is unitary. The *Kavya* is a discourse in the sense of its celebration of the demon-kind — Ravana and

delegitimization of Rama whose principal weakness as a fighter is revealed in his being gifted grace and benediction.

A discourse, in other words, is a reading that can become 'complete and intact' only with the 'eclipse' of the writer of a text — only when the writer does not interfere with the meaning made out by the reader. As Paul Ricoeur argues:

The reader is absent from the act of writing; the writer is absent from the act of reading. The text thus produces a double eclipse of the reader and the writer ...I like to say that to read a book is to consider its author as already dead and the book as posthumous. For it is when the author is dead that the relation to the book becomes complete and, as it were, intact. The author can no longer respond; it only remains to read his work.<sup>45</sup>

Let us now turn over to the second postulate of discourse analysis: the role of politics in the formation, persistence and decomposition of a discourse needs to be emphasized.

The 'arrival' of a discourse is a cent percent political act and a violent one, at that. Paul Ricoeur in his paper entitled 'Violence and Language' contends:

Violence in discourse consists in the claim that a single one of its modalities (read, the meanings, SKD) exhausts the realm of speech. To be non-violent in discourse is to respect the plurality and diversity of languages.<sup>46</sup>

The nationalist discourse, as articulated by the English-educated middle class towards the close of the last century in Bengal, according to Partha Chatterjee, reduced 'the plurality and diversity' that Indian nation ('federal nation' as it is nowadays called) stands for, to an alibi for 'rabidly ultra-Hindu propaganda'.<sup>47</sup> The articulation of the nationalist discourse, in other words, involved a process of ruthless violence that operated through 'reduction, persuasion and flattery' rather than 'brute, mute exercise of force'. It was the 'violence of a sophist rather than that of an executioner'. It is, as Faucault says, a warfare 'carried through some other means'.

Secondly, politics also makes a discourse appear legitimate and valid.

What is the discursive knowledge that shows an ability to persist, about? First of all, it is about what it celebrates as its 'idea' or 'principle' or what Levi-Strauss called, 'a limited number of principles'. For instance, nationalist discourse centres on the sanctity of the nation-state (see, Chapter IV). Secondly, almost in the same vein, it also delegitimizes any of its transgressions and infringements. The discourse, according to Pierre Macherey, determines what it does not, or more accurately, what it cannot say – its 'constitutive absence'.<sup>48</sup> Its 'absence' is indispensable to the articulation of a discourse as much as any attempt at filling it up becomes successful only at the expense of decimating the discourse.

For instance, the politics of ULFA, as we will see, registers solely in negative terms and as a moment of transgression in the nationalist discourse. Similarly, I have attempted to show how the articulation of a nationalist discourse in post-colonial India involved a marginalization of the project of Dr B.R. Ambedkar for the amelioration of the Untouchables.<sup>49</sup> These exclusions are obligatory to the articulation of the nationalist discourse in India.

Thirdly, politics also exists as a 'negative work', that is to say, to question the relations of power configured within a discourse. Hence, what is 'excluded' in an extant discourse is 'included' in the literary analysis. This being so, a literary analysis marks the 'production of a new knowledge' — a new discourse, to be precise. The main purpose of this book is to retrieve the discourse of ULFA through the method of discourse analysis. But, a new discourse constitutes a new exclusion and that is how the possibility of an impeccable knowledge is 'infinitely deferred'. Discourse analysis is a recognition of this ultimate futility of human enterprise to acquire the ultimate knowledge.

## Notes and References

1. See, Walker Connor, 'Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying', *World Politics*, 24(3), April, 1972.
2. Rajni Kothari, 'State and Statelessness in our Time', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXVI (11 & 12), Annual Number, 1992, p. 553.
3. See, Anjan Ghosh, 'Does the Indian State Speak for the Hindus?' *The Statesman*, 27 August, 1987. Also Mark & Amrita Kesselman, 'Class, Communism and Official Complicity: India After Indira', *Monthly Review*, January, 1985.
4. See, Samir Kumar Das, *State, Ethnicity And The Assam Movement* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1992).
5. ...While citizens enjoy full civil and political rights, aliens are denied a good many of them including the right of suffrage and the right to become members of the elective bodies under the Constitution.

See, Debo Prasad Barooah, 'Foreign Nationals Issue in Indian North-East with special reference to Assam' in Pankaj Thakur (ed.), *India's North-East: A Multi-Faceted View* (Guwahati: Prakash Publishing House, 1982) p.15.

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