Article

Revolutionaries as Political Women
Female Cadres of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)

Manashi Misra
Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi

Abstract
The purpose of studying women’s participation in radical movements, as the classical study *We Were Making History* notes, is ‘an attempt to broaden the history of that struggle by recovering the subjective experience of women, to capture women’s voices from the past and to present issues as they were perceived by women’ (*Stree Shakti Sanghathana*, 1989, 2). Taking this framework as the point of departure, this article seeks to explore the history of women’s participation in the secessionist politics of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Deviating from the existing scholarships on the subject that rightly focus on the lack of adequate women’s representation at the leadership level, this article argues that representation at formal political negotiations is not the only form of political activity that women aspire to. Instead, in their own way, many of these revolutionaries have in fact turned into ‘political women’. Fictional writings in the Assamese language are more forthcoming than academic scholarship in recognizing this alternative, informal politics in which women engage. At the same time, it is important to note that these ‘political women’ need not be free from conventional gendered prejudices.

Keywords
ULFA, political women, Assam movement, marriage, benevolent patriarchy

The purpose of studying women’s participation in radical movements, as the classical study *We Were Making History* notes, is ‘an attempt to broaden the history of that struggle by recovering the subjective experience of women, to capture women’s voices from the past and to present issues as they were perceived by women’ (*Stree Shakti Sanghathana*, 1989, 2). Taking this framework as the point of departure, this article seeks to explore the history of women’s participation in the secessionist politics of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). With its projected objective of liberating Assam from the ‘colonial exploitation of India’, through armed means ULFA demonstrated the ‘fluidity of national identity relations’ (*Baruah* 2020, 128). Its brief but phenomenal rise in influence from the mid-1980s was surprising, but as Hiren Gohain points out, not wholly unexpected in the political vacuum created in the aftermath of the Assam Movement (*Gohain*...
Despite the larger scepticism about the goal of attaining independence through armed means, their articulation on self-determination and demand to control one’s own resources found support among the Assamese population (Mahanta 2013, Kalita 2013, Baruah 2020).

Formed on the 7th of April, 1979, ULFA advocated secession from India through armed rebellion and the establishment of a sovereign, independent state of Assam. The *Jatiya Mukti Sangram* or national liberation struggle was the first step to end the ‘systematic colonial exploitation of the central government’, which would pave the way for establishing ‘scientific socialism’. The prevalent political situation of Assam in the 1970s and 1980s provided the immediate context for the meteoric rise of and overwhelming public support for ULFA. Increasing economic underdevelopment of the state despite abundance of natural resources in the post-colonial years and indifferent policies of the central government (Misra 1980, Das 2018) furthered the feeling of deprivation among the Assamese middle class. The six-year-long Assam Movement (1979-85) against ‘illegal immigration’ into the state had concluded with the signing of the Assam Accord on the 15th of August, 1985. The political vacuum created thereafter and growing disenchantment with the Central Government proved ideal for the growth of radical political alternatives (Baruah 2005, Gohain 2007, Hazarika 1994). ULFA was at its most influential in the mid-1980s, at times running a ‘parallel government’ in certain parts of Assam during the first government of the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) in 1986. ULFA did pose a short-lived but potent threat to the Indian state, warranting the need for three major army operations against it.\(^1\) With the declaration of unconditional ceasefire by majority of top leaders in 2011, the outfit split into two factions in 2013, pro-talk and pro-independence. Despite significant decline of its influence among the people of the state, it must be noted that ULFA’s relationship with the people is a rather complicated one. Recent reports in the Assamese language media have hinted at a substantial growth of cadres in the pro-independence faction (*Amar Assom*, 23rd of November, 2021), young women constituting a majority among these new recruits. Notably, women’s recruitment in ULFA by itself is not a new occurrence. As we shall see below, they have been part of the organization from the very beginning. This article aims to look at the emergence of ‘political women’ from within the fold of ULFA’s secessionist politics when the ‘radical refashioning of …domesticities, familial worlds and gender relations’ (Sarkar 2005, 557) was taking shape.

The term ‘political women’ in this context is used to refer to those women in radical nationalist politics of Assam who were gradually transforming into new political subjects. Following Sharma (2021), if we term the politics of ULFA

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\(^1\) Two of these, Operation Bajrang (1990) and Operation Rhino (1991), were concentrated in Assam. Even though India continues to deny its involvement in Operation All Clear (2003) undertaken by the Royal Bhutan Army against ULFA camps in their territory, some reports suggest otherwise. For instance, *The Telegraph* (December 19, 2003) reported on tricolour draped bodies being brought to the helipad of the 11 Garhwal regiment at Darranga in mid-December, 2003. Also see “Stitching Peace Together: Indira Goswami in conversation with Sanjoy Hazarika and Giti Sen” (2005).
post-2011 (with the exception of the pro-independence faction led by Paresh Baruah) as ‘para state’ politics, the compartmentalization of social and political becomes an important point of discussion. Political autonomy and state structure are included as part of politics, whereas women’s specific rights are strictly seen as social and outside of the scope of the political. It is in this context that the conceptual category of political women becomes important for our discussion. While it is true that in both the Assam movement and ULFA, women ‘could not quite enter the world of male leaders and organizers’, it would be rather simplistic to reduce the participants into mere followers of traditional, patriarchal leadership. Many of them found their own path in dealing with political possibilities, thereby transforming the self and the world. Their position at the margin meant they could see the reality both from the inside and from the outside. By turning our focus onto these women, it can be argued that in certain crucial moments of the history of Assam, the ‘margin’ was an important, vital component of the whole (hooks 1984). Following Jonathan Spencer’s understanding of the political as the complex field of social practices, moral judgements and imaginative possibilities, I argue that these women at the margin were indeed ‘political women’; even though many of them took the conscious decision to stay away from ‘formal’ political activities. Many of the writings on ULFA and the Assam Movement have overlooked such politicization of women at the margin, and the significant transformation of their lives through the process. The intent here is to argue against the prevalent assumption that women in rebel organizations such as ULFA are largely devoid of agency, and as cadres, their relationship with the higher leadership (often male) is that of abject marginalization and humiliation; thereby robbing them of individual identity (Sarkar 2005, 544). Autobiographical accounts of ULFA women give legitimacy to such accusations; but for our purpose, the larger issue is to investigate the politicization of women in a movement not specifically concerned with gender issues and the leadership of which was still attached to traditional, patriarchal norms. When women left home to join armed, guerrilla insurgency, they also transformed perceived notions of gender norms in Assamese society, which in turn transformed the goals and outcomes of various other social movements in the state (Moral 2017, 70).

From personal interviews conducted with ULFA women, it becomes clear that their reasons for joining the organization were varied, as were their familial and educational backgrounds. Published memoirs of women members reveal that some of them went to join ULFA as married partners, and such members were deemed somewhat ‘inferior’ in comparison to those who had their autonomous reasons to choose the path of rebellion. One common thread binding all these very different women was that the first generation of female ULFA cadres was moulded by their experience of participating in the All-Assam Students’ Association (AASU) led Assam movement (1979-85). It was primarily a movement for ‘detection, disenfranchisement and deportation’ of illegal immigrants, but later studies have shown (Gohain and Bora 2020, Gohain 2010, Mahanta 2013, Talukdar and Kalita 2019, Choudhury 2021) that the rise of ULFA cannot be
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completely dissociated from the movement, despite ostensible differences in their objectives. Even though ULFA formally came into existence on April 7, 1979 – a few months prior to the beginning of the Assam Movement – there are debates around the veracity of this date, and some commentators argue that the brutal election of 1983 led to the emergence of ULFA from within the extremist wing of the movement (Rammohan 2005, 31) For Sajal Nag, ‘even though it carefully distances itself from the aims and objectives of the anti-foreigners agitation, of the early 1980s, the emergence of ULFA is only a sequel to the latter’ (Nag 2017, 375).

One of the most important aspects of the Assam Movement was the large-scale participation of women (Misra 1980, Barthakur and Goswami 1990, Dutta 2012, Kalita 2013). In order to navigate to the ‘other side of silence’ in conventional history writing, where women are primarily shown as picketers and volunteers following orders of (male) leaders and then quietly retreated to mundane domesticity once the movement was over (Dutta 2012), fictional narratives and women’s autobiographical accounts provide the much-needed guidance. These sites of enquiry complicate the linear narrative of women’s participation in Assamese ‘subnationalist’ politics (or phenomenon that Saikia (2004) terms local nationalism, and Guha (1980) little nationalism). The Assamese language can boast of a number of insightful fictional narratives on the Assam Movement and on the radical politics of ULFA. In this article, I have chosen to refer to only three: Felane (2003), Ai Samay, Sei Samay (2007) and Mahajibanar Adharshila (1993). The primary reason for this selective approach is that in all three women characters are not peripheral to the story; these are, in fact, their stories intertwined with the larger story of social and political change. I choose to engage with these three texts written by women authors, not because they alone portray ‘real women’s experiences’, but because ‘they articulate and respond to ideologies from complexly constituted and decentred positions within them’ (Tharu and Lalita 1993, 38). At the outset, this choice may appear to follow the framework of ‘gynocritics’, a term Elaine Showalter uses to denote ‘scholarship concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women’ (cited in Tharu and Lalita 1991,18). However, acknowledging the universalising tendency present within this theory, I do not

2 For a detailed discussion on such narratives depicting the turbulent periods of the Assam Movement and ULFA, see Amit R. Baishya (2019), Rakhee Kalita (2009), Aruni Kashyap (2020). In this article, I have referred to the work of Arupa Patangia Kalita (Felanee) and Rita Choudhury (Ai Samay... and Mahajibanar Adharshila). Felanee is the story of subaltern women’s struggle at the time of violent assertion of ethnic nationalism. To use Amit R. Baishya’s (2019) words, Felanee- literally meaning thrown away- is the metaphor for an earlier good life being thrown away by violence and terror. As a renowned critic of the movement and secessionism of ULFA, Kalita primarily focuses on the recovery of humanity at the time of terror. Choudhury’s work is important because of the intersection of her personal experience as a student leader of the Assam Movement with the larger political debates of regional identity and self-determination.
claim to offer a ‘gynocritical’ reading of these texts. Rather, the aim is to uncover the subversions implicit in the daily negotiations of the ‘political woman’.

**Reclaiming the Public: The Assam Movement and Women’s Participation**

Even though scholarly opinions on the association of the AASU led Assam Movement with ULFA vary, there is enough evidence to suggest that most of the founding members of ULFA were also committed workers of the movement (Mahanta 2013, Nath 2013). As recorded in the memoirs of former ULFA women (Rajkonwar 2013) and also shared in personal communications by others, the experience of participating in the movement proved to be an important mobilizing factor for many early recruits of the ULFA. It may be noted here that in all important mass protest movements in post-colonial Assam, be it the movement for the establishment of oil refinery or the language movement (Baruah 1999), women had always been present in massive numbers. However, as Tilottoma Misra (1988) points out, the mobilization of women was almost always in terms of familial ties such as mothers and sisters lending their support to sons/brothers who were engaged in the ‘more important patriotic duties’. Their enthusiastic response and participation would be obscured once the movement was over, and they returned to the life of domesticity.

What made women’s participation in the Assam Movement different was that unlike the earlier movements, this was more demanding of women’s time, for more than half a decade. Women were ubiquitous in all activities – as peaceful satyagrahis defying curfew orders or as blockaders of oil pipelines and trains, outnumbering their male counterparts most of the time (Misra 1988, 10, Barthakur and Goswami 1990). Such large presence of women however does not necessarily make it a feminist movement. This movement and later ULFA while constituting a participatory space also reflected the existing ‘contradiction between women’s experiences and containing patriarchal ideologies’ (Sangari and Vaid 1989, 26). In fact, during the Assam Movement, the consensus was that all other issues including those related to women could wait; and all usual political and social activities were to be suspended unless they were aimed at helping or supporting the movement (Mahanta 1988, 133). Despite an overwhelming participation by women in the movement, no woman was inducted into the central executive of

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4 The word Satyagrahi in this instance is used in the Gandhian sense. For Gandhi, satyagraha was ‘civil insistence on or the tenacity in the pursuit of truth’, that would ultimately ‘activate the soul of the opponent’. The satyagrahi is required to take a principled stance on what is believed to be her just demand, facing violence inflicted on her with patience and without compromise. The idea is to initiate a process of complex self-examination in the enemy- thereby seeking a moral response. The leaders of the Assam Movement saw Gandhi as their leader, and peaceful satyagraha was portrayed as the mechanism to ensure justice for the state. The movement however was not entirely non-violent. For details, see Pisharoty (2019), Gohain and Bora (2020), Gohain (2017).
the AASU or the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), nor was any woman present during negotiations with the state or central government.

It is in such a context of high ‘visibility’ but low ‘participation’ (Kikon 2019) that characterized women’s role in protest movements in Assam that we need to examine the ULFA woman. The following section is an attempt to understand the expression of radical Assamese subnationalism through her perspective.

**Rebelling for a Cause: Women in ULFA**

A rich body of literature has extensively engaged with women’s position in the ULFA movement (Kalita 2013, Moral 2014, 2017, Goswami 2015, Saksena 2018, Deka 2020, Pathak 2021). While acknowledging the immense contribution of such scholarships for insightful commentary on the lives of women rebels, it merits our attention that there is also a tendency to view women’s participation in radical nationalism as primarily ‘serving the immediate cause of the men in their lives’ (Moral 2014, 70). Yet another scholar argues that rebel groups like ULFA ‘prefer’ to recruit women as they are perceived to be ‘highly obedient, compliant, easily manipulated, deeply committed and intensely loyal’ (Goswami 2015, 15). Such perceptions are persuasive of the gendered binary between a revolutionary and a supporter, the former masculine and the latter feminine (Sinha Roy 2011). Conversations with ULFA women and reading of published memoirs demonstrate unsustainability and inaccuracy of such reductionist binary.

The respondents interviewed for this article were chosen using the snowball sampling method. All of them now support the peace initiatives of the pro-talk faction, though none has formally ‘surrendered’. All conversations were recorded with the consent of the respondent, however, to protect their privacy I have used only the initials of their names, except for those who are well-known public figures in Assam. I did carry a semi-structured questionnaire while approaching the respondents, but conversations were rarely strictly around these questions. I have used published memoirs of women who participated in the Assam Movement and were cadres of ULFA, and fictional writings in the Assamese language to analyse their transition into ‘political women’. Personal conversations with rebel women provide important insights into their political agency, away from the ‘marginalization’ argument mentioned above. Literary writings corroborate this expression of agency often overlooked in conventional scholarships. Taken together, these are important sources to trace the ordinary woman’s foray into ‘politics’ as a ‘self-affirming activity’ (Sarkar 2005).

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5 The AAGSP was formed in August, 1979 to formally steer the Assam agitation. Initially AASU, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Assam Jatiyatavadi Dal, Purvanchal Lok Parishad and Plains Tribal Council were included in the AAGSP. Later a number of other organizations including the Mula Gobhur Apantha and the Jagra Mahila Samiti came under AAGSP. It was a signatory of the Assam Accord along with AASU in 1985. After the Accord was signed, the parishad was officially dismantled in October, 1985.
Unlike the Maoists in Nepal, where the number of women in the PLA was 30-50%, with recruitment in Maoist militia surpassing even that of men (Lecomte-Telouine 2013), ULFA could not boast of a large number of women recruits, which is estimated to be approximately 12-15% of total recruits (Moral 2014). Nor was there any separate women’s wing of ULFA, even though some writers have erroneously mentioned the existence of a ‘nari bahini’. This absence distinguished ULFA from the Nepali Maoists and several other insurgent groups in South Asia such as the LTTE in Sri Lanka, or the NSCN in Nagaland (Herath 2012, Chenoy and Chenoy 2010). The Maoists worked towards simultaneous ending of class and gender oppression, leading to large scale participation of women in both political and combat roles (Lecomte-Telouine 2013). The Maoist movement was proud of their unique brand of ‘martial feminism’, a term originally coined in the context of the LTTE. According to Peter Schalk, martial feminism developed through a set of discourses and practices that rationalized women’s participation in martial roles that were traditionally the preserve of men. Hisila Yami used this theoretical frame in the context of Nepali Maoists and Adele Balasingham for LTTE in Sri Lanka to counter the perpetual inequality both in the society as well as within revolutionary outfits (Lecomte-Telouine 2013,324).

ULFA on the other hand, paid scant attention to gender equality per se, even though as cadres in personal interviews pointed out, there was no sexual division of labour in their training camps, and martial training was similar for both men and women. Again, similar to the Nepali Maoists but in contrast to their Indian ‘cousins’, ULFA never prohibited marriage or birth of children. By encouraging marriage between people coming from diverse caste, community and regional groups, it may be argued, that ULFA tried and to some extent succeeded in bridging the identity caveats present in a multi-ethnic society like Assam.

It may be noted that although some researchers claim that women’s entry into the fold of ULFA started a decade after the establishment of the organization (Kalita 2013) in actuality there had always been women members since the beginning (SR and JCG in personal communication with author). SR, whom I met in Mongoldoi town in Central Assam, was the first woman cadre recruited into ULFA. She was also one of the first women to receive arms training within the organization in the late 1980s. SR was studying in ninth standard when she became actively involved in the Assam Movement, and later joined ULFA as an overground activist in late 1979 (personal communication on March 8, 2021).

In seeking answer to the question as to why women were attracted to the secessionist politics of ULFA, varied responses from diverse positionalities point at the interplay of the personal and the political. As earlier writings have recorded, the first batch of women to join the organization were actively involved in the Assam Movement, and were visible in various organizational and cultural activities in their localities (Kalita 2013, Rajkonwar 2013). Some would see ULFA as an escape route from their social standing, a space where they could hope to be equal with others which was not possible in normal circumstances for a tribal woman within the Assamese society (Kalita 2013). Yet others would seek to join
the organization to escape domestic violence (Saksena 2018). Personal communications open up multiple sites of enquiry: their motivation for joining a rebel outfit like ULFA and their views on the gender dynamics within it.

EP, now based in Tinsukia, for instance, joined ULFA in 1992 after her dream of getting a government job was ended by a corrupt administration. She was studying for a law degree at that time while working in a temporary position at the Dibrugarh district court. She needed an experience certificate to apply for a permanent government job. But she was denied that certificate, as the advertisement was bogus. Someone had already paid the bribe and got the job. EP says she was hurt

‘…. That people could buy jobs with money… I wanted the job on merit or through legal means… this really inspired me to go and join ULFA’. (Personal communication on February 26, 2021).

As a sixteen-year-old studying in the 11th standard in 1990, SN had witnessed the terror of Operation Bajrang from close quarters. Now, a teacher at a government school in Lakhipathar, she viewed ULFA as the means to avenge the humiliation meted out to people in her village during multiple army operations where they were ‘treated like a colony’ with inhuman restrictions on their movements. These incidents ‘made her blood boil’, she saw reason behind ULFA’s demand (Personal communication, February 27-28, 2021).

BD, now staying at a designated camp in Eastern Assam, was ‘inspired by the patriotic duties of the boys’ who would come to her parents’ house looking for shelter or for a general discussion with her schoolteacher father. As a schoolgirl studying for her matriculation examination in 1993-94, she heard snippets of conversation while ‘serving tea and food to the visitors’. From the little she heard, she

‘wanted to do something for Assam in that line… I went away in 1995 immediately after my matric examination… my parents did not know. I lied to them that I was going to the market, and went with them…’ (Personal communication, July 16, 2022).

For EP, the reason for joining a rebel outfit is primarily personal: the feeling of deprivation as she was denied the chance to get a just appointment. However, she was not merely looking for a personal solution to the problem. Her decision to join ULFA could be viewed as a part of the larger political ideal of a sovereign, independent state of Assam as dreamt by the outfit, where such injustice would be abolished. SN’s association of the jati’s honour (‘they’ treated ‘us’ like a colony) and her support for the rebel group exhibit the intertwining of the personal with the political, and vice versa. The usage of ‘our’ is significant not only for
demarcating the familial from the external/outsider, but it also denotes the extent to which political decisions are influenced by the personal. Similarly, when BD mentions her decision as impacted by ‘snippets of conversation’ that she had overheard, there is an unsaid acceptance of the sexual division of labour, where political discussion belongs to the masculine domain, a space women can enter temporarily, while carrying out their personal, nurturing activities such as serving food. Such transgressions however can have far-reaching consequences, such as BD’s decision to go away from home and join the rebel organization. At the same time, this must not be seen as an act of rebellion against patriarchal control. BD is perfectly comfortable with the idea of certain specific rules for women in a ‘respectable’ family as ‘their bad reputation can affect the whole family’. Notably, BD going away for the *jati* is not seen as a blemish on the family’s reputation. Such intersection between ‘duty towards the family’ and ‘towards the nation’ was also present in ULFA’s marriage policy. Constitutionally, it supported inter-caste and inter-community marriage, while also encouraging ‘members to marry destitute women cadres, raped or assaulted women and widows of insurgency who have sacrificed much for the liberation of the nation’ (Kalita 2013, 18). It is difficult to ignore the underlying assumption of marriage as the ultimate destiny for women, and the duty of the benevolent revolutionary coming to the rescue of those somehow unable to fulfil this destiny.

**Gender and Agency in Women’s Work Within ULFA**

Broadly, women’s work within ULFA can be categorized into logistics, recruitment, and political functions (Deka 2020). A few women were inducted into the military wing of the outfit, and given the hierarchical relationship between the two (Misra 2014), they were more powerful than the rest (Moral 2014, 68). There also existed a subtle but real class distinction between women who received combat training and those who did not (Moral 2014, 68, Rajkonwar 2013). The better educated and articulate ones received better attention, such as continuous supply of books (Goswami 2015, 16). It was mandatory to go through a long and strenuous training process before they were recruited for combat roles. Despite uniform training imparted to male and female cadres in the military wing, the gender hierarchy was striking in the fact that male cadres had access to important information and could participate in strategic discussions, privileges that women were denied (Moral 2014, 68). In her memoir, Kaberi Kachari Rajkonwar mentions an incident when she along with another female cadre were charged with indiscipline for speaking out of turn in a meeting of top (all male) leaders.

It is noteworthy that in personal conversations, ULFA women insisted that the organization did not endorse sexual division of labour. Male cadres did share work like cooking or fetching water. However, these conversations are also revealing of the image of the ‘real’ combatant or rebel cast in the masculine form (Sinha Roy 2011). SR for instance, said:
'We had female trainers... they instructed both male and female cadres... in order to train men, they needed to be prepared like men... physically and mentally'(Personal communication, March 8, 2021).

However, such egalitarian attitude towards all kinds of work was short lived – a more convenient arrangement for camp life, and there was no effort to develop this into a fully formed critique of gender hierarchy in work. For instance, there was an almost resigned acceptance that household responsibilities do impose restrictions on women, which men rarely have to face. SR for instance, could not be part of the peace negotiation process because:

... I had children also by then... bringing up children in prison... all these meant I was not fully available for our ongoing work ... ... but I had to stay away... I was unable to do the required study... I also saw the dark side of politics in people among us... people wanted to destroy my image... I will have to call them enemies... At that time, a lot of chaos happened because people wanted positions... I did not want to get into those things as we are the same family with the same ideology, same rules... what is there to fight with your own family? (Personal communication, March 8, 2021; emphasis added).

EP, married to a senior leader of ULFA who has now come overground, portrays a picture of the rebel organization that does not distinguish it from the functioning of a conventional, patriarchal family. She thinks certain divisions between men and women in ULFA was inevitable as

...the organization kept the system of marriage intact... so it was natural to have families and take care of the families... we were as committed to the cause as male members... but when children were born at the camp, we had to think about their education. When we were in Bangladesh, we started a school... not very good, but for basic preliminary education... This did not work out, so we had to devise a different system...

When we were in Dhanmondi district, all children were admitted in a nearby Bengali medium school ... ... we made a duty chart... one mother will drop and bring the children from school for one week... additionally, we also did paddy cultivation there. We had kept cattle and poultry... (Personal communication, February 26, 2021).
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It is interesting to note that in these snippets of conversations, women accept the complicated nature of family relations. SR agrees that the institution can be unfair towards women, but she is also aware that ‘one cannot always fight with the family’. ER indirectly admits that the conventional system of marriage is based on inevitable gender inequality. As we notice in her conversation, childcare responsibilities did keep women preoccupied within ULFA.

MH joined ULFA in 1989 and was among the few women to have been promoted to the rank of second lieutenant. Now in her early 50s, she lives in eastern Assam with her husband and two children. She does not think there was any specific hurdle present for women within ULFA due to their childcare responsibilities. One can however trace a faint disdain reserved for feminine attributes in her conversation:

> Even if I say so myself, I was an established military trainer… master…. New recruits were scared of me. [Paresh] Baruah sir used to threaten them by taking my name. … for this reason, I had a very different temperament. My character, my nature… everything, became administrative… even now I cannot adjust with ordinary people, with women, on many things. What do women generally talk about? Fashion, cooking, shopping… women generally talk about these things only. Even if they are highly educated. I am not like that …I spent my whole life in the jungle, I have little time for beauty or fashion. I had just one civil dress… in the jungle, I used to wear the army dress and outside just one dress. I did not care what people thought about my appearance. We had an aim, and we must move towards the aim... (Personal communication, March 2, 2021).

This statement along with SR’s observation noted above that ‘in order to train men women needed to be prepared like men’, indicates the acceptance of aggressive masculinity as the norm. In fact, there is room for speculation that MH uses the word administrative as synonym for masculine or at the very least, non-feminine. When she expresses disdain for ‘typical’ female behaviour and her insistence that she is ‘not like that’, this may be read as an internalisation of the ‘inferiorized psyche of women’ (quoted in Beechey 1979, 66). If gender is ‘a constitutive element of perceived differences between the sexes’ (Scott 1988, 43), such essentializations follow what Joan Scott terms as the normative elements of gender, that ‘typically take the form of a fixed binary opposition, categorically and unequivocally asserting the meaning of male and female, masculine and feminine’ (Scott 1988, 43).

It is against such a backdrop that a discussion on the immanent politicization of ULFA women is called for. Household or childcare responsibilities may have kept women out of leadership positions or from the realm of formal politics, but such
relative obscurity must not be taken as evidence of their lack of, or incomplete, politicisation. In the following section, we look at various ways through which women assert their agency.

‘Political Women’

In Rita Choudhury’s novel *Mahajibonor Adharshila* (1993), we meet Barasha, once a committed worker of the Assam Movement, now married and busy with household responsibilities. As her marriage with Palash becomes increasingly strained, Barasha comes closer to a group of disillusioned young men. Her active mentoring of these young men transforms their lives forever. Her younger brother and later, her brother-in-law join armed militancy. Barasha is not secretive about her support for ‘the organization’, she ‘would have joined too if she could’. This statement is laden with meanings; as a wife and daughter in law, she must first fulfil her duties. Home is thus a priority, but this choice is hardly devoid of agency. Barasha makes a number of significant political decisions, all from the private, personal sphere. A seemingly trivial matter of attending the wedding of a woman considered their ‘social inferior’ becomes a question involving women’s choice: she tells her husband that he would never interfere in her decision to attend the wedding if he thought she could decide for herself. Given this, it would be an inaccurate assessment of Barasha and many others like her that they receded to the world of mundane domesticity after their public role was over. Political consciousness continued to grow, but in different forms for different women, even within the home. As Barasha says, when she had stepped out of the house to work for the society during the Assam movement, it was not a careless, temporary indulgence. Her respect for certain values will remain constant. She refuses to lose her values and herself within domestic pressure.

Similarly, Aditi Chowdhury in *Ai Somay, Sei Somay* (2007), in another novel by the same author, famous student leader of the movement is now a college teacher and mother of two daughters. Aditi is leading a reclusive but far from ordinary life. She continues to make political choices within the realm of the personal: she walks out of an unhappy marriage, brings up the child of an old friend as her own, adopts an abandoned baby. In the process, she obliterates the binary between private and the public, rendering the home space into an ‘active, creative and strategic public space for negotiations’ (Sharma 2018, 49).

For many women in Assam, it was the experience of participating in the Assam movement that changed their perception about politics. When they resorted to symbolic fasts, cooked and served food to movement activists (and later to ULFA cadres), or joined the movement in large numbers as picketers they were very much ‘doing politics’. Along with the personal being political, politics itself was emerging as deeply personal. As Tilottoma Misra showed in her article ‘Assam: A Colonial Hinterland’ (1980), semi-literate village women sitting in *dharna* had the political awareness to discuss oil royalty with fellow picketers (Misra 1980, 1357). It is simplistic to argue that once the movement was over, such women simply
‘returned to their homes and resumed their lives as if that episode had never been’ (Dutta 2012, 109). When they did go back to their homes, ‘the home might be unchanged, but the woman who came back was not so’ (Sarkar 2005, 553). And they undertook some ‘actual, intentional political work as world transformative and self-transformative activity’ (Sarkar 1995, 541, emphasis added) in the informal, domestic realm. If the dichotomy between the home (private) and the public arena is not always sustainable in conflict situation (Kikon and Sundar 2019, 79), then the informal need not be only the source of politics, it can itself be a public, political space (Sharma 2018, 49). MH points at the confidence and self-awareness that ULFA women developed in the organization:

… in training period, we used to tell the cadres that men and women are equal… those who have come out after training they think like that... women are confident, they do not think I am a woman, I can’t do this or that... our girls are now driving autos, running shops, opening small tea gardens, many of them are alone as their husband are missing... but they are earning a living. If we had not trained them in treating men and women equal, they would have found it difficult to adjust in this society... there is a friend of mine, her husband went missing after operation All Clear. She brought up her son alone … we learnt that women could live alone, even if the man is not there... (Personal communication, March 2, 2021).

Such transformation of women in rural Assam reminds us of the visible change in gender dynamics during the Maoist Movement in Nepal when Nepali women had to take up work traditionally deemed ‘masculine’ (Manchanda 2001). Similarly, as Tamara Herath (2012) shows, in Sri Lanka the LTTE was able to reconstruct gender relations within the revolutionary movement (the Ah-lu-mai) which in turn challenged the existing gender dynamics in civilian Tamil society embodied in the image of the Puthumai Pen. The latter stood out in a society that historically endorsed female dependency on male protectionism through their independence. This Puthumai Pen or the new woman was able to challenge traditional patriarchy by challenging traditional gender roles (Hearth 2012:183). Similarly, when women located within traditional, rural Assamese society realized that ‘they could live without a man’ it was a powerful statement to reclaim one’s agency. At the same time, it is important to remain attentive to the fact that unlike the LTTE and the Nepali Maoists, ULFA could not quite be credited with specific gender reforms within the Assamese society. AC, who was among the first batch of cadres to have received arms training in Kachin in the 1980s, believes that

‘without the husband a woman has no value in our society… there are many women in ULFA whose husbands have died or are missing, no one cares for them...’ (Personal communication, February 27, 2021, emphasis added).
His wife EP shares her experience of looking for a rented accommodation in Tinsukia when AC was in jail from 2009 to 2011:

… it was difficult to get a house… People would ask me who is your guardian, who will sign the document…. I had to lie about my husband to get this house (the house where she now lives with her family now) … the landlord asked to bring someone as guardian. My brother-in-law and nephew came… (Personal communication, February 26, 2021).

Kaberi Kachari Rajkonwar’s autobiographical account Issa Anissa Sweatteu Kisu Kotha (2013) is an important documentation of the transformation she experienced within ULFA. If Rajkonwar’s personal life was intensely political, her politics was also defined by the personal. Her unconventional marriage to Arabinda Rajkohwa, the chairperson of ULFA, was marked by loneliness and a constant battle for attention from a man preoccupied with the ‘Mukti sangram’ or liberation struggle. She was alone when she lost her first child in a miscarriage (109-110). She could meet her husband only a few months after the tragedy, after making a long and arduous journey to the camp in Myanmar. During the journey, people of the region saw Rajkonwar as the ‘memsahib’ who had gone there to fight for the nation, but in her self-perception, she was the selfish wife looking for her husband (122). Rajkonwar’s feelings for her husband oscillated between helpless anger at his apparent lack of concern towards her and admiration for his commitment towards the organization. At times she reprimanded herself for her ‘pettiness’, as the wife of a ‘gallant fighter’, she should be able to rise above the ordinary (167).

It would however be a mistake to perceive these sentimentalities as expressions of a non-political wife. She was perturbed by her transition to a ‘typical housewife’, constantly preoccupied with domestic drudgery (226), and loss of individuality (210). Her refusal to go to Bangladesh from Bhutan with her severely sick daughter was seen as disobedience. For Arabinda Rajkhowa, the collective decision of the organization in choosing the place of residence was non-negotiable as their marriage was solemnized with the consent of the organization (210). Rajkonwar on the other hand demanded to know what he thought about her going to Bangladesh as she ‘did not marry the whole organization, with everyone’s [in the organization] permission you and I married each other’ (212). Her uninhibited criticism of ULFA commander in chief Paresh Baruah’s strategy after the debacle of Operation All Clear was declared an act of indiscipline, as she was ‘not entitled to speak in high level organizational meetings’. The complete silence of Rajkhowa at that moment made her realize that she had sacrificed so many valuable years of her life for the nation, for realization of patriotic ideals, but in reality, there was nothing new or extra-ordinary in her life. It was the same path treaded by her mother, grandmother, aunts (272). It was at that moment that Rajkonwar began her journey towards self-discovery by working on her interests again. She had translated a couple of novels from Bangla to Assamese, and was also involved with proof reading and editing of Swadhinata, a newsletter published by ULFA. These
are moments of significant political transition that we see in her life, even though she rarely mentions any obvious political awakening of the kind seen in the lives of revolutionary women such as Ushabai Dange (Loomba 2019). It is through the working of the everyday— for instance, her insistence on a few hours of free time just for herself in the evening— that she marked her journey towards a political woman.

It is also pertinent to note Rajkonwar’s perception of personal loss at momentous events of political change. After their arrest from Bangladesh in 2009, they were handed over to the Assam police rather dramatically (Borbora 2010). After Rajkhowa’s release from prison in 2011, he took the initiative for unconditional peace negotiations with the government of India (Nath 2013). When Rajkonwar writes about these developments in her memoir, her most poignant memory is the loss of her daughter Bohagi’s training in classical dance. Rajkonwar mentions this incident as an example of the loss of an artist in the quest for freedom. Such a loss is unlikely to find mention in conventional historiography of ULFA and Assamese radical nationalism, but for Rajkonwar this was a significant personal sacrifice on account of their political beliefs.

It is relevant to note that it was not only the women who participated in the Assam movement or were part of ULFA in various capacities who underwent tremendous transformation, survivors of conflict situation also attempted to rebuild their lives as autonomous agents. Complex questions of ethnic identity and gender were important components of this process of rebuilding lives. In Arupa Patangia Kalita’s feminist novel Felanee (2003) we meet the titular character by the same name. This is an important work of fiction in the Assamese language, not only for its feminist underpinnings, but also for the vast trajectory of Assam’s ‘necropolitical history’ that it covers. As Amit R Baishya (2019) points out, the allegory of Felanee encompasses the major events of the post-colonial history of Assam: the Assam Movement, rise of ULFA, emergence of Bodo ethnic nationalism, division within ULFA and descend of the terror of SULFA and the secret killings.

At various points in her life, externally imposed attire and patriarchal authority seek to determine Felanee’s ethnic identity. For instance, a Bodo relative insists that she should wear the dokhona in place of mekhi sador as she is actually a Bodo. He also scoffs at her hesitancy in wearing coloured clothes as a Hindu widow, Bodo society is free from such evils, he says. Members of ULFA warn her not to mingle with ‘outsiders’ as she is an ethnic Assamese. Speaking for herself, Felanee does not know ‘Whose blood flows through her veins?’ What she does know is that ‘To survive, she must cover her body with the raggedy cloth and finish making the puffed rice. She should finish the two murhas too. Moni will come soon, she must cook lunch…’ (155). ‘As a subject and ethical agent’ (Baishya 2016, 196) Felanee is capable of making conscious images and decisions, thereby completing her journey into a ‘political’ being. The most crucial expression of this political
journey is Felanee leading a contingent of ordinary rural women in their peaceful protests demanding the release of their sons detained at the nearby army camp.

**Women after Rebellion: Negotiating Boundaries of the Personal and the Political**

How do women cadres of ULFA negotiate the boundaries between the personal and the political once they decide to leave the path of rebellion and return ‘home’? With the declaration of formal ceasefire by ULFA in 2011, the demobilization process opened new avenues for the woman rebel’s politicization. Broadly, we can analyse their political activism after rebellion through the following categories:

**Professional Women** who have sought to rebuild their lives post-rebellion by engaging in different kinds of professions that include setting up of small businesses, writing, association with non-governmental organizations and self-help groups that provide livelihood opportunities primarily to women in the rural areas. They may be disillusioned with the goal of political sovereignty, but they still believe in the goal of economic self-sufficiency, a goal endorsed both during the Assam Movement and by ULFA. It may be argued that by ensuring economic agency for the most marginalized women in Assamese society, they are trying to reconstitute society from below. EP presides over a cluster of self-help groups in Tinsukia that train women in making crafts from water hyacinth. Kaberi Kachari Rajkonwar’s NGO Srishti Silks in Lakowa is now in the forefront of training local women in weaving with modern technology. She is also engaged in reviving the lost art of Mejankari silk weaving.

There are others who can be categorized as **Disillusioned women rebels**, who now no longer believe in the high idealism propagated by ULFA. Women like SN now prioritise caution when it comes to supporting mass protest movements, but their scepticism must not be confused with being apolitical. SN has a nuanced understanding of contemporary politics in Assam. She is unsparing in her criticism of movement leaders such as Akhil Gogoi as she thinks they do not respond to criticisms. When she says no mother should lose her child in the name of the nation or community, she does not denounce politics per se, but makes a conscious effort to choose a different kind of politics.

In addition to the above two categories, there is the third category: **the forgotten warriors**. Some have been pushed into obscurity because of circumstances, some others have chosen to remain invisible in order to continue with their present ordinary lives. They are nevertheless important components of these historical moments in post-colonial Assam. Many of them are still ‘making history’ in their

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6 Akhil Gogoi is the leader of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS). He was the most vocal opponent of the Citizenship Amendment Act and was arrested under the Unlawful Activities (prevention) Act in December, 2019.
own subversive ways. Women whose husbands went missing after operation All clear in Bhutan prepared for a long battle to arrive at a closure. The habeas corpus petition filed by one of them was dismissed as the Indian Army asserted it had no role in that operation, and India could not claim nationals felled in foreign territory. Even though they are not party to any negotiations with the government, their resilience ensured that the issue of these missing cadres found a place in the list of conditions submitted to the Central government for peace initiatives. According to Moral (2014), these ‘conflict widows’ may not be highly visible, but they continue to rebel against patriarchal norms in their own innovative ways. For instance, they continue to wear the vermillion mark as a symbol of married Hindu women, thereby converting a patriarchal symbol into an act of subversion. There are others like BD and RG whom I met in a designated camp located in eastern Assam. Now in their late 40s, both of them decided to support the peace efforts led by Arabinda Rajkhowa. They have unwavering confidence in Rajkhowa’s leadership and do not have much to say in regularly held public meetings to discuss the latest developments in the peace process. This apparent lack of interest in ‘politics’ however hardly makes them apolitical. RG wants researchers to focus on the children of parents killed in terrorist attacks (personal communication, July 16, 2022). She is clear that such work must necessarily include children of police personnel and other state officials once declared as the enemy by ULFA. Such an approach could go a long way in building trust and lasting peace.

Conclusion

Gender, as feminist scholarship has amply demonstrated, is intricately linked with the concept of national identity (De Mel 2001, Ramaswamy 2003, Yuval-Davis 2008). It is not difficult to see the embeddedness of gender in both the anti-foreigners agitation led by AASU and in the colonial exploitation thesis of ULFA. A close reading of Assamese nationalist writers such as Ambikagiri Raichoudhury (Misra 2021) reveals the negative masculine projection of the ‘foreigner’, whereas the exploitation of the resources of Assam can take the figurative form of the ‘masculine’ mainlander plundering the ‘effete’ periphery (Sharma 2004, Bora 2010). Given such gendered interpretations, it is rather a restrictive approach to view women’s presence in nationalist movements through the lens of only ‘victim’ or ‘agency’. As M.S. Roy (2011: 35) points out, the heroic and ‘magical’ participation of women in such movements is variedly viewed as the story of ‘loss or pain’ (victims of violence or bereaved mother/sister) or as extraordinary contribution of women to a primarily ‘masculine’ cause. In between these two, women’s participation in revolutionary causes is enmeshed with other forms of ‘politics’ – as self-transformative and world transformative activities (Sarkar 2005). This article has attempted to look at such transformation of women in the specific context of radical secessionist politics of ULFA. While it is important to look into the aspect of women’s underwhelming presence at leadership positions within

\[ \text{See footnote 1 above} \]
such rebel organizations, what women do in the sphere of ‘informal politics’ deserves equal attention. As I note above, the confidence among women to take charge of their own lives (and at times, changing others’ lives as well) is by all means an important development. Many a times, women may choose to remain out of formal politics while continuing their work in the relative obscurity of the private. It is in this context that Kaberi Kachari Rajkonwar’s work in the handloom industry must be accorded the significance it deserves. Her work cannot be taken as secondary to the primarily male dominated peace process. Society in Assam at the aftermath of the AASU led movement or emergence of ULFA did not see the rise of ‘martial feminism’, but participation of women in these movements cannot be reduced to mere instrumental roles to ‘ensure more jobs and opportunities for their children’, as some earlier commentators tend to do (Barthakur and Goswami 1990, 228). How they changed these movements and in turn themselves were changed is the focal point of discussion in this article. MH’s assertion of women’s ability to ‘do everything on their own’, or SN’s critique of mass movement leaders, or the fictional Felance confronting the might of the armed forces for securing the release of her son or Barasha’s struggle to make autonomous choices even in seemingly trivial matters, all of them indicate ‘alternative vision of their work, body, family life and death’ (Yami 2021, 121) that Assamese women could visualise after their experience with these movements. The aim is to move the focus away from the ‘entrenched patriarchal forces’ that pushed women to assume public role when needed, and then sent them back to the domestic, private sphere. The ‘uncharted terrain of women’s political participation’ (Roy 2011, 35) deserves our attention for shaping both women and movements in myriad ways.

This article does not specifically dwell on the peace activism of women in conflict zones of India. This is, undoubtedly, important work; despite the scepticism towards the exclusive association of women (primarily as mothers) with peace (Kolas 2017). The aim is to shift the focus towards the crucial political acts undertaken at the realm of the private and the informal. Such an approach may also be useful in offering an alternative understanding of the ‘feminization of peace’.

**Author Bio**

Manashi Misra teaches Political Science at Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi. She is currently pursuing her PhD in identity formation and the location of gender in the context of post-colonial Assam. Her writings have been published in the *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* and the *Indian Express* among others.

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8 See Kannabiran et.al (2004) for a critique of the Maoist movement in India in this regard.
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