

# No farewell to arms

**T**REIS - *ba-sore palo ki, lathi, goli, CRP* (what have we got in 30 years - sticks, bullets and the Central Reserve Police force). "Tej dileyo, tel nadiyuu" (we shall give blood but not oil). "Jai Ai Asom" (long live Assam). There were some of the slogans shouted with full-throated fervour by thousands of people in Assam, when they challenged the security forces to open fire on them during the heady days of the Assam movement. Their six-year-long agitation was crowned with the success of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in the Assembly elections in December 1985.

Now, five years later, no such emotional upsurge or protest marked the dismissal of the AGP government, the imposition of President's Rule and the ban on the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Indeed, very few tears were shed over the dismissal of the AGP government, and contrary to expectations in certain quarters, there were even obvious signs of relief at the prospect of a reprieve from the "inaction" of the AGP regime, and the terror unleashed by the militants belonging to ULFA. The sense of relief was not limited to the urban areas alone - reports from the rural areas indicated that the recent spurt in extortions, whether by the ULFA activists or those pretending to collect donations in the name of the organisation, had led to terror in many parts of the state except those which are ULFA's known areas of influence.

All the same, there is serious concern over the fall-out of President's Rule and the induction of the army to tackle ULFA. There is no denying the fact that ULFA had gathered sympathy and support from a sizeable number of people in the Brahmaputra valley. These include people who did not necessarily support some of the activities of the banned organisation but nursed a lurking sympathy for the "boys fighting for a cause" there. There are apprehensions over the long-term impact of the army action and also about possible bloodshed. There are also many who fear a backlash from the trained ultras once the security forces return to their barracks.

The Centre was obviously caught between the devil and the deep sea. Assam was hurtling to a stage where bloodshed was inevitable. The long rope provided by the AGP government and the growing militancy of the organisation and the declared stance of its leaders had left little doubt over an imminent showdown between the security forces and ULFA. The possibility of widespread violence was inherent in such an action. On the other hand, the scheduled elections to the State Assembly and parliamentary constituencies were also expected to unleash violence in large parts of the state.

Though ULFA had been claiming that it had no interest in any "Indian" political party and had declared that it would not support any party in the elections, it was obvious that its sympathies lay with the AGP, and consequently, against the Congress(I). A majority of political workers killed by ULFA extremists during the last three years belong to the Congress (I) while none belonged to the AGP. Among its recent victims was Rohiteswar Saikia, a brother of the former chief minister and president of the Assam Pradesh Congress(I) Committee, Hiteswar Saikia. He had unsuccessfully contested a by-election against an AGP candidate and his killing had greatly demoralised the Congress(I) leaders and workers in the state.

In view of the kid gloves treatment meted out to ULFA by the AGP government, and the fact that the AGP was the only viable regional party, it was clear that the chauvinist underground organisation would have preferred it to return to power rather than any other party in the state. There were even reports that ULFA was pressurising the AGP leaders to let some of its cadres contest on AGP tickets. However, it was felt by some political observers that the influence of ULFA extended to no more than 40 assembly segments in the Brahmaputra valley. Since the state has 126 assembly constituencies - and given the fact that the AGP would have found it very difficult to get support from outside the Brahmaputra valley - it would not have been a cakewalk for the party. Yet the chances of a fair and free election in the valley were virtually ruled out.

Another cause for serious concern during the election campaign would have been the growing antagonism between ULFA and the United Reservation Minorities Council of Assam (URMCA). The organisation, representing the minorities and a section of tribals in the state, had openly taken up cudgels against ULFA and had even threatened to physically confront them. Members of the two organisations had clashed on some occasions in the recent past and there were fears of wide-spread clashes among them during the elections. A senior leader of URMCA, Amrit Rabha, was recently shot by ULFA extremists at Nalbari. URMCA had also declared that it would put up candidates for the Assembly elections. The organisation, which became active during the past one year, has its strongholds in the Lakhimpur and Jorhat districts which overlap with the "ULFA areas".

The All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), which had spearheaded an agitation to demand a separate state, had also declared its intention to oppose elections till its demand was accepted. Violence was on the cards in the Bodo-dominated

areas, between the supporter's of ABSU and the rival Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA). The rivalry between the two organisations has already claimed scores of victims. The PTCA, which had three representatives in the Assembly, was certain to contest the elections. Incidentally there is resentment among the people that while ULFA has been banned, no such action has been taken against URMCA and ABSU as violence was anticipated from these two organisations as well.

The postponement of elections may have temporarily warded off violence but grave doubts exist over the ability of the army and para-military forces to crush ULFA. The army does not have an enviable record in dealing with similar situations in this part of the country. The army action in Nagaland since the sixties, for example, reduced violence, but has alienated the people. The situation in Tripura, where the army was inducted on the eve of Assembly elections, was fundamentally different from the one prevailing in Assam. The Tribal National Volunteers (TNV) did not enjoy the public support enjoyed by ULFA in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The TNV was working to a gameplan devised by the Congress(I) as became evident from the letters exchanged between the TNV supremo, Bijoy Hranghawl and the Congress(I) leaders before the elections and the subsequent "surrender" arranged by the government.

This time, the army could not achieve any major success during the initial days of "Operation Bajrang" in Assam and thus lost the advantages of a sudden and surprise action. ULFA leaders had anticipated a crack-down and had ordered that the camps be vacated on November 19, which was a week prior to the actual army operations. Since the top ULFA leaders had given a slip to the army and the security forces were not able to recover any sophisticated arms stockpiled by the banned organisation, there is no option for the army but to search villages. The risk of high-handedness, atrocities and excesses are greater in such operations. This may lead to further alienation and prove counter-productive. It would have been ideal for the army to move out of the area after a brief action, but the progress in the initial days does not indicate such a possibility.

Allegations about alleged army atrocities, harassment, rapes and murders had, in fact, begun to pour in from the day the army action was initiated. Some of the reports were highly provocative and spoke of women being herded and taken to unknown destinations by armymen. Rumours also circulated about casualty rates among the army (several local newspapers reported that 161 army personnel were killed in an encounter, while the army

authorities maintained that there was just one casualty). Investigations into some of the reported incidents revealed that the reports were either false or highly exaggerated, yet the possibility of such incidents cannot be ruled out if the army and para-military forces are forced to stay on for a longer period.

**U**LFA was formed in 1979, the year the Assam movement was launched. The organisation remained inactive for a few years and indulged in sporadic acts of violence. Its ranks swelled after the AGP wrested power and a large number of youth, frustrated by the performance of the government, joined the underground organisation. A majority of leaders and workers of ULFA are, therefore, those who had actively participated in the Assam movement and were well known to the AGP leaders. The singular failure of the AGP government to create jobs for lakhs of unemployed youth and to look after their interests bred frustration among those who had sacrificed so much during the six-year agitation.

Meanwhile the AGP leaders indulged in corruption, a luxurious life-style, petty squabbles and autocratic behaviour. The government even failed to take effective steps for the detection and deportation of illegal migrants, against whom the Assam movement was directed. Such ineptitude was least expected from leaders hoisted to power after a long and strenuous agitation. This led the disillusioned youth to believe that the future was bleak and that if even the AGP government was unable to look after their interests, there could be no hope from any other government.

Such a situation was ripe for the growth of underground militancy. The ULFA leaders had, by that time, come into contact with some other secessionist underground organisations operating in the region. Its top leaders had obtained training in camps located in the Kachin area of Burma (now Myanmar) and had been influenced by their pro-left ideology. Back home, they received support from a section of the intelligentsia which too had actively supported the Assam movement but was disillusioned with the performance of the AGP government. It was around such a time that myths were woven around the activities and capabilities of ULFA. It acquired a "Robinhood image" and took over effective administration in rural areas where the government machinery was non-existent or ineffective. It administered summary justice, distributed essential items to the poor, helped villagers in harvesting and imposed a ban on social vices.

The AGP leaders, meanwhile, preferred to look the other way and some of them actually supported their activities. The AGP was partly shy of initiating any action against

ULFA due to the fact that a majority of underground workers were intimately known to the AGP leaders. The rapid increase in the popularity of ULFA was another reason that had unnerved the AGP which itself lacked a firm base. The AGP leaders remained undecided on how to tackle the growing clout of ULFA, and this attitude sent signals to the district administrations to keep away from ULFA's activities. The underground organisation thus grew bolder in its actions.

However, ULFA had begun to lose its sheen over the past one year, as it stepped up violence and indulged in extortion of huge sums of money. The kidnapping and killing of several persons, for no reason other than extortion of money or political vendetta, began to disillusion people who had earlier firmly believed that it could do no wrong. The brutal face of ULFA was later unmasked at Lakhpathar, the headquarters of the "commander-in-chief" of the banned organisation, where mass graves were found. Some of the bodies were found tied with rope and dumped into graves. These included bodies of women. The kidnapping of the general manager of the Guwahati division of the Indian Oil Corporation, along with his son and driver in June this year, further dented the image of ULFA. Subsequently the organisation demanded huge amounts from the managements of tea gardens which led to panic among the plantation workers. ULFA was also unable to check the activities of a large number of youth who masqueraded as members of ULFA to extort money from the common people.

While incidents of extortions increased, ULFA studiously avoided incidents of physical violence over the past few months. Obviously it was not keen to invite the wrath of the Centre at this juncture. The AGP declared that the situation in the state was more peaceful as compared to several other states and that incidents of violence in Assam were less than in Delhi. There is no doubt that the AGP leaders genuinely shared the concern expressed by well-wishers of Assam that army action may worsen the situation.

However, with impending elections the Centre had to act, and this temporary lull was just that - temporary. The crack-down is now a *fait accompli*. But the need for caution cannot be overemphasised. Any unnecessary extension of central rule can lead to serious repercussions. A determined attempt has now to be made by the Centre to tackle the causes that led to the rise of such an organisation - it must not be treated as a law and order problem alone. As for Assam, which has passed through a turbulent decade, the prospect of a peaceful future remains elusive. The cancer of terrorism is now too deeply rooted to be killed merely by army action.