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## Anup Chetia's Return a Shot in the Arm for Assam Peace Process

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ULFA General Secretary Anup Chetia interacting with media persons after being produced at District & Sessions Court in Guwahati on Monday. Photo: PTI (14/12/2015)

*The fragile peace process in strife-torn Assam appears likely to get a fresh impetus after the return of Anup Chetia, the northeastern State's most talked about rebel. Chetia, who was released recently by a Guwahati court after 18 years in a Bangladesh prison, is widely expected to push forward the peace talks between the pro-talks faction of ULFA headed by Arabinda Rajkhowa and the Government of India, says **Subir Bhaumik**. Politically, any solution to the four-decade long conflict will be a morale booster for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – helping the beleaguered Narendra Modi-led government at the Centre and providing a campaign point for the party in the 2016 State election.*

Anup Chetia is not exactly a Chota Rajan. While Rajan's return to India was splashed across the national media, Chetia's return was a rather tame affair, despite his undeniable relevance to the politics of peace in Assam. India's troubled northeastern State now has its best shot at lasting peace after nearly four decades of insurgency, believe those involved with the Assam peace process.

Chetia, the general secretary of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), a dreaded insurgent group that has operated in Assam since 1979 demanding a "sovereign socialist Assam", was deported to India in November 2015 by Bangladesh, 18 years after his arrest in Dhaka in 1997. The legacy of blood and violence in Assam took a turn for the better after a faction of the ULFA decided to give peace a chance by announcing unilateral ceasefire and showing interest in talks with the Indian government. The pro-talks faction's most prominent leader so far has been Arabinda Rajkhowa, chairman of the ULFA's political wing, who has been holding parleys with representatives of the Government of India since he was handed over by Bangladesh in November 2010.

Assam's police chief Khagen Sarmah, one of the masterminds behind isolating the ULFA hawks and getting negotiations started with doves, had this to say when Chetia flew back to India:

*"Chetia's return from Bangladesh will definitely have a huge negative impact on Paresh Barua's faction which has refused to be part of the peace process. Though Chetia was in prison for nearly 16 years, it had a positive psychological impact on rebels seeking shelter in Bangladesh. This is now over."*<sup>1</sup>

The wily police chief, who has spent much of his career in intelligence, made it clear that Chetia, whose real name is Golap Barua, is key to the government's game to isolate Paresh Barua and deprive the hawkish warlord of friends and legitimacy to continue to pursue his armed movement from the jungles of Myanmar. That Sarmah was not off the mark was evident in the way Paresh Barua reacted.

A day after Chetia opted to join the peace talks and abjure violence, Barua told this writer in a telephone interview (he gave similar interviews to the Assam Tribune and The Times of India as well) that he would fight on.

*"As general secretary, he [Chetia] was my senior in the ULFA and I respect his judgment. He played a big role in building ULFA and there is no denying that. But as far as I am concerned, I will not join the peace talks unless the Indian government decides to discuss the core issue of Assam's sovereignty."*<sup>2</sup>

Barua also disclosed that Art of Living guru Sri Sri Ravishankar had been in touch with him as a mediator for the Modi government and had requested him to drop the demand for discussing Assam's sovereignty. "Modi's government will fall if he accepts such a demand," Barua quoted Ravishankar as telling him.<sup>3</sup> Barua appears firm on his stand but is not unwilling to leave the doors open for Chetia, should he change his mind — in any case, he seems to have refrained from outright hostility. In fact, Barua has never closed his doors on anyone in the ULFA who may have a change of mind. There have been reports that some ULFA activists — their numbers are not many, though — who had sided with the pro-talks faction led by chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa had subsequently gone back to the Barua faction in the Myanmar jungles, frustrated as they were with the slow and secret process of the peace talks.

Sarmah's predecessor G. M. Srivastava spelt out in some detail the game behind rushing the repatriation of Anup Chetia. In a detailed interview to Assam Tribune, Srivastava, who is credited with the successful trans-border campaign against the rebels in Tripura, said Chetia's return and his subsequent decision to join the peace process is important for three reasons:<sup>4</sup>

- (a) After Chetia joined the peace talks, no 'big name' in the ULFA remains in the field to support Paresh Barua in the rebel hierarchy and the military wing chief stands completely isolated
- (b) It is after Chetia's arrest in Bangladesh in 1997 that the military wing led by Paresh Barua became preponderant and its influence grew — so, with Chetia back, that can now be reversed and that would help the peace process
- (c) Chetia is a mature politician, one of a handful in the ULFA, and he can give the Assam peace negotiations a 'meaningful thrust'

### **ULFA's Internal Dynamics**

What Srivastava, a master practitioner of Kautilya's doctrine of Saam, Daam, Dand, Bhed, has not spelt out is equally important — the ethnic equation within the ULFA. Chetia is not only a close relative of Barua, but also a fellow Muttock. The Muttocks and the Morans in Upper Assam have provided most of the recruits to Paresh Barua since the split in the ULFA in 2009, when Arabinda Rajkhowa and other senior leaders, quietly handed over to India after their arrest in Bangladesh, decided to start unconditional negotiations with the Indian government. Jiban Moran has been effectively Paresh Barua's second-in-command in the Myanmar jungles.

The Muttocks and the Morans have a history of uncompromising rebellion and Barua's narrative of 'no talks without discussion on sovereignty' draws much from that. The Moamoria Rebellion (1769–1806) was started by the Muttocks and the Morans, adherents of the Moamara Sattrā, a monastery practising and propagating the Ekasarana Dharma that attracted huge following among the two tribes. The leaders of the sattrā capitalised on the widespread discontent against the Ahom kings and the nobles and helped the Muttocks and the Morans rise in rebellion protesting against the Paik system. <sup>5</sup> The Ahom king even lost his capital and retaking that involved much bloodshed of the subjects. The Ahom king failed to retake the entire kingdom and a portion in the northeast, called Bengmara, became virtually independent.

In the days after the ULFA split, when Paresh Barua lost support of other senior leaders who drifted towards the pro-talks group, the military wing chief fell back on the narrative of the Moamaria Rebellion to justify his obduracy. By all indications, Barua was counting on Chetia's support following the former general secretary's return. If Chetia backed Paresh, the Muttock-Moran narrative of uncompromising struggle could be reinforced and the holding out in the jungles of Myanmar justified. With Chetia refusing to endorse the Barua line and actually apologising to the people of Assam for inflicting the travails of an armed insurgency, Barua's narrative stands punctured in his core support-recruitment base — the Muttocks and Morans of Upper Assam. The grand narrative of Assam's struggle for independence has been already lost with a majority of the top ULFA leaders joining the talks. Now the little narrative of uncompromising struggle — a kind of a last ditch stand — built around the history of the Moamoria Rebellion also may fall apart with Chetia joining the doves.

### **Assamese nationality formation**

The assimilative nature of Assamese nationality formation process, reinforced over the centuries by the message of social inclusiveness of Shankardeva and Ajan Pir, weakened considerably during the anti-foreigner agitation (1979-1985). Not only did it alienate the 'Na Asamiyas' (East Bengal Muslims) who had adopted Assamese as their mother tongue, but also the tribal groups that had come close to adopting the Assamese language and culture. The Assam agitation ended with a compromise between the Indian state and the agitating All Assam Students Union, but the disillusionment over the 1985 Accord triggered the rise of the ULFA by legitimising a constituency for separatism in the State which had been New Delhi's 'political sub-contractor' in running the Northeast. <sup>6</sup>

The 1985 Accord was followed by a phase of assertive re-tribalisation in Assam's politics, when tribe after tribe began movements, sometimes violent, demanding separate States or autonomous regions. Some of these movements, like those of the Bodos, were carry-overs from the past and had a history, but were substantially more violent. The All Bodo Students Union's (ABSU) call for 'Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty', followed by similar movements by Karbis, Dimasas, and other tribes, drove nails into the Assamese nationality formation process. <sup>7</sup>

### **Reimagining Assam**

As the ULFA challenged the might of the Indian state, it made a bold attempt to widen its imagination of the Assamese nation. Breaking away from its anti-minority stance of the 1980s, the ULFA defined its separatist movement against India as one 'not just for the Assamese, but for all dwellers of Assam, who identified with its cause'. <sup>8</sup> Some say this was a tactical move to justify their presence in Bangladesh but others explain this as an attempt to rejuvenate the inclusive nationality formation process to garner support of the Asombaxi (dwellers of Assam), without which it was impossible to create a sufficiently broad social support base to take on the Indian state and its armed forces.

While organisational and leadership weaknesses may explain the decline of the ULFA, some feel that its failure to address the immigration issue, which continues to upset the ethnic Assamese, contributed to the loss of popular appeal that the ULFA enjoyed in the 1980s. The proliferation of the movements for tribal homelands, many of them as violent as the ULFA, also undermined the cohesiveness of the once-powerful group. Gradually, it lost support from minorities and then from other tribes — the Rabhas are a classic case as they once accounted for much of ULFA's recruitment in western Assam, but then turned to join in large numbers groups fighting for a separate Rabha homeland.

When the Rajkhowa faction started talks with the Centre in 2010 almost immediately after many top leaders were handed over to India by Bangladesh, they got support from much of Assam's fledgling civil society. The small group of lawyers, journalists and writers who had steadfastly backed the separatist movement just withered away in the past five years.

The BJP's aggressive entry into Assam politics, flogging the illegal migration issue, further weakened the support base of the ULFA. Coupled with successful counter-insurgency operations and backed by Bangladesh's aggressive action against all northeastern rebel groups in its territory, the resurfacing of the politics of illegal migration has taken the wind out of the ULFA's sails.

### **Barua's last gambit**

For the last five years, the anti-talks faction has survived in the jungles of Myanmar thanks to support from some other rebel groups like the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang faction) (NSCN[Khaplang]). Paresh Barua had attracted some recruits from the Muttock-Moran communities, but as desertions became rampant and the going got hard, he resorted to harsh measures like summary executions. Even his old confidante Partha Gogoi was not spared. Then, when Khaplang reneged on his ceasefire with the Indian government in early 2015, Barua got his chance. He is said to have masterminded the formation of a new anti-Indian rebel coalition called the United Liberation Front of Western South-east Asia (UNLFW). This has four constituents — the United Liberation Front of Assam (Independent), NSCN (Khaplang), Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO) and National Democratic Front of Boroland (Songbijit). The Meitei groups did not join the coalition but their fighters have joined them in attacking Indian targets. The fighters of this coalition have launched a string of attacks on Indian security forces since the breakdown of the ceasefire with Khaplang.

New Delhi was shaken by the attacks, one of which led to the massacre of 18 soldiers of the Dogra regiment in Manipur. Though ULFA fighters were not involved with these attacks, Barua unleashed a propaganda offensive (which he is best at), leading to some wild media speculation about the imminent formation of a government-in-exile. <sup>9</sup> In fact, the ULFA's anti-talks faction failed in its attacks on police stations, like at Kakopathar, when the rockets they fired missed their target by a wide margin. Deserters from the Barua faction have told intelligence officials, who spoke to me on condition of anonymity, that most ULFA cadres were demoralised and looking to return home, but were deterred by the executions of leaders like Partha Gogoi.

The Modi government authorised a trans-border riposte on the rebel bases and there were conflicting reports of casualties after two such attacks in July 2015. However, the attacks also helped emphasise the importance of the peace process in the northeast.

New Delhi's political response started unfolding. The 'framework agreement' with the NSCN (Issac-Muivah) in August 2015, within a month of the Khaplang group's biggest attacks, should be seen in this background. Though only an agreement to provide for a final settlement, this accord was publicised to isolate Khaplang from India's Naga peace process. The Indian hurry to bring back Chetia, immediately after the formation of the UNLFW in the jungles of Myanmar, can be explained only by New Delhi's determination to speed up the peace process in Assam, alongside the one with the Nagas.

With State Assembly polls in Assam due in early 2016, there is an extra incentive for the Modi government to push the peace deal in the State. The Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Kiren Rijju is on record that "efforts are on to achieve a breakthrough soon". <sup>10</sup> An acceptable peace accord will not only invest the pro-talks ULFA with some legitimacy and help the BJP to claim that their government has restored peace to Assam, it will also help isolate Barua even further in the last trans-border regrouping zone available to rebels from India's northeast. With his effective fighting strength down to a few hundreds, Barua will either have to switch to high-voltage terrorism (that may further alienate the Assamese) or call it a day or retire to full time gun-running for survival. New Delhi will be happy to see him lose out as a political force (and Chetia to take over), consigned to a corner in Myanmar's jungles, possibly leaving an inspired Assamese film-maker to consider a script on the 'Last 300', on the lines of the Spartan hero Leonidas.

Myanmar is in transition and its army, apprehensive of Aung Sang Suu Kyi's impatience to take charge, may not mind doing favours to important foreign powers like India. The military retains control over both Home, Defence and Border Affairs Ministries and all that the Tatmadaw (Burma Army) needs to do is repeat a Bhutan 2003 in Sagaing and New Delhi will be beholden to it. It is not without reason that India's Ministry of External Affairs has welcomed the elections in Myanmar but not referred to Aung Sang Suu Kyi's victory in glowing terms as many in the West have. India realises it still needs the army in Myanmar to handle the last bastion of its northeastern insurgents. The terrain does not make it easy, but with Indian support and the Tatmadaw's new-found airpower, an 'Ops All Clear' a la Bhutan is not impossible in the jungles of Myanmar. Suu Kyi may have asked for transparency in trans-border military operations in her interview with Karan Thapar, <sup>11</sup> but the Tatmadaw entertain no such reservations and will do so if it brings some advantage in return. For the 'goalkeeper of the Assam revolution', <sup>12</sup> time is clearly running out.

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- 12.^ Paresh Barua played goalkeeper at club level in Assam in the late 1970s and his soccer prowess got him a railway job.

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