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WHEN DAWN BECOMES A MIRAGE The Insurgency This Book Refuses To Flatten

Rajeev Bhattacharyya, *ULFA: The Mirage of Dawn*. New Delhi: Harper Collins India, 2023, 409 pp., ₹599.

Rajeev Bhattacharyya's book on the United Liberation Front of Asom is the most substantial journalistic account of the organization in recent years for a single reason: it refuses the two simplifications that usually distort discussion of ULFA (Author's Note, chapters 1, 10). The book does not romanticize the outfit as a pure embodiment of Assamese grievance, nor does it reduce ULFA to a flat security label. Instead, it reconstructs the movement as something simultaneously political, social, military, and transnational—born in the shadow of the Assam Movement, nourished by anxieties over migration and neglect of the Assamese, sustained by sanctuary abroad, hardened by clandestine networks, and finally weakened by the widening gap between revolutionary rhetoric and lived experience.

In December 2023, the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and the pro-talks ULFA faction signed a Memorandum of Settlement, making the book's framework more relevant than ever. This faction of ULFA agreed to abjure violence, surrender arms, disband its armed organization, and join the democratic process. But the story did not end there. Bhattacharyya himself warned that the anti-talks faction led by Paresh Baruah, based in the borderlands of Myanmar and China, as many reports indicate, remained weakened but still capable of violence. Official Home Ministry records in 2024 and 2025 continued to list ULFA under the Unlawful Activities framework. This book is, therefore, no monument to a dead conflict. It is perhaps the anatomy of a movement whose ideological core has eroded faster than its cross-border residue.

The Reporter Who Went Where Few Would Go

Bhattacharyya is unusually well placed to write this book. A Guwahati-based journalist who worked for *The Times of India*, *The Telegraph*, *The Indian Express*, and *Times Now* before turning to this volume, he had already authored *Lens and the Guerrilla* and *Rendezvous with Rebels: Journey to Meet India's Most Wanted Men*. More importantly, he spent years on the borderlands linking India to Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and China. This book is not an archival compilation written from Delhi like many of the armchair chroniclers we come across while reading on insurgency or the Northeast. It comes from long exposure to the landscape, the actors, and the rumor-economy of insurgency in the Northeast.

What distinguishes the book methodologically is perhaps not just duration but access. Bhattacharyya conducted exclusive interviews with overground and underground ULFA functionaries across the Northeast,

Myanmar, and Bangladesh, as well as former army and police officers. He also gained access to papers belonging to ULFA leaders. The seed of the book lay in the four months it took him in 2011–2012 to interview Paresh Baruah at Taga in Myanmar’s Sagaing Region. That journey also produced the aforementioned *Rendezvous with Rebels*. He physically went where few others would go, and that fact is written into the texture of the book.

Across the length of the book, we read the author’s interviews not only with Baruah, Arabinda Rajkhowa, and Anup Chetia (Author’s Note, chapters 1, 10), but also with former ULFA cadres, Assam Police officers, former Research & Analysis Wing officials, military officers, National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Khaplang (NSCN–K)¹ figures such as S.S. Khaplang, and Bangladeshi interlocutors (Author’s Note, chapters 8–9). The result is not perfect source transparency—a problem I will return to—but it is unmistakably the product of painstaking and risky fieldwork across clandestine, militarized, and cross-border environments. Writing on insurgencies is easiest after the gunfire fades and hardest while secrecy, fear, and contested memory still govern testimony. Bhattacharyya’s book was difficult to write for exactly those reasons: access to underground actors, conflicting recollections, the need to verify self-serving accounts, and the challenge of balancing insurgent testimony with state and security perspectives.

How The Narrative Is Built

The book moves from genesis to militarization, from legitimacy to corrosion, and from cross-border expansion to strategic exhaustion. Ten chapters carry titles such as “The Rising Sun,” “The Kachin Experie-

¹ Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, “Banned Organisations,” Press Information Bureau, February 7, 2024, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2003157>



nce,” “Mission Robin Hood,” “Crescent and the Dragon,” “March of Death,” “Bolts from the Blue,” “Turncoats and Secret Killers,” “The Dragon’s Thunder,” “Trail of Calamities,” and “Twilight on the Horizon.” Even a glance at the titles tells you something about the method. Bhattacharyya does not write an abstract institutional history. He writes episodically, through decisive passages in the movement’s life: its birth amid political disillusionment, its early external training networks, its Robin Hood moment in Assam, its Pakistan and Bangladesh links, the violence of the 1990s, the Surrendered United Liberation Front of Asom² (SULFA) and secret-killings era, Bhutan’s Operation All Clear, the Chittagong arms pipeline, and the slow drift toward talks and fragmentation. These chapters time and again talk to each other, giving the reader a sense of familiarity and a fun engagement as they read the book. This structure is one of the book’s strengths because it preserves movement without sacrificing analytical accumulation. The reader is not burdened with chronology for chronology’s sake! The narrative develops like a map of insurgent adaptation. Early chapters focus on grievance and formation. The middle chapters show how an insurgent movement became internationalized through Kachin, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Bhutan. Later chapters show what happens when the sanctuary shrinks, leadership divides, and revolutionary legitimacy cannot survive the combined pressure of repression, extortion, internal distrust, and strategic contradiction. The book also does a really good job of bringing to life the small yet crucial episodes, such as the procurement of food or the outbreak of the deadly,

² Mrinal Talukdar, Utpal Borpujari, and Kaushik Deka, “Secret Killings of Assam” (Guwahati/New Delhi: Nanda Talukdar Foundation/Human Rights Law Network, 2009), 16, 30, 48, 86, 194; and Dixita Deka, “The ‘Secret Killings’ in Assam: Counterinsurgency and Censoring Perpetrator Information,” *Journal of Perpetrator Research* 6, no. 1 (2022).

mysterious jungle disease called mokhlong³ throughout the chapters. The book remains readable despite the density of names, operations, and clandestine routes it covers. That readability is integral to the argument because it allows the book to show that ULFA's history, as with other insurgent outfits, was never simply a sequence of police cases but a long political arc with distinct phases of ascent, concealment, overreach, fracture, and decline.

What The Book Sees Better Than Most Writing On ULFA

The book is strongest when it explains why ULFA once looked politically plausible to significant sections of Assamese society. Bhattacharyya links ULFA's rise not only to Assamese grievance but also to the failure of constitutional regionalism. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government, formed amid high expectations after years of hardship during the Assam Movement, ultimately failed to meet those aspirations and, by showing sympathy toward ULFA, helped create the conditions in which the insurgent group could pose as a disciplined alternative. For a moment at least in certain pockets of Assam, they were successful. By the end of 1987, ULFA's "parallel government" had begun to take shape. By the end of 1990, it was responsible for 113 killings, even as it accumulated popular appeal. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU),⁴ AGP, and ULFA once drew from a common psychological constituency rooted in fear of demographic marginalization, economic displacement, and reduced control over state power (Bhattacharyya, chapter 1). That is precisely the contextualization a good security book needs. Insurgencies do not begin

³ V. Dev, V.P. Sharma, and K. Barman, "Mosquito-Borne Diseases in Assam, North-East India: Current Status and Key Challenges," *WHO South-East Asia Journal of Public Health* 4, no. 1 (2015): 20–29, esp. 20–22.

⁴ Sanjib Baruah, *India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 109–48.



as acts of pure criminality. They begin where grievance finds organization, and where political disappointment makes armed alternatives appear credible.

Equally important is the book's treatment of ULFA's early "Robin Hood" phase. The chapter title, "Mission Robin Hood," points to a period when ULFA presented itself as more than a gun-bearing conspiracy. It performed rule, enforced discipline, and appeared to embody a moral alternative to widespread corruption and drift. That early social legitimacy is important because the rest of the book can then be read as the story of how such legitimacy is spent. Once the organization's military arm began to overshadow its political leadership, once extortion and coercion became more visible, and once violence became less intelligible as national liberation and more visible as organizational survival, the mirage in the title came into focus. Bhattacharyya is particularly attentive to the point at which symbolic capital decays into fear. That is not the same as treating ULFA simply as a criminal gang. Rather, it shows how insurgent organizations can move along a spectrum where governance, nationalism, terrorism, and predation coexist uneasily.

For a reader interested in security studies and cross-border militancy, however, the book's greatest contribution lies elsewhere: in showing that ULFA was not merely an Assamese insurgent group but a borderland enterprise. Camps in Bhutan and Myanmar, hideouts in Bangladesh, weapons consignments from China, and training routes to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border—all of this appears in the narrative. Sanctuary in Bangladesh was critical to ULFA's survival. The outfit established camps at Satcherri and Sherpur and hideouts in Dhaka. Its deepest overseas links were with Bangladesh, as shown above, and with

Pakistan whose Inter-Services Intelligence began training ULFA⁵ in 1991, with later batches trained during 1996–2002 (Bhattacharyya, chapter 4). The relationship deepened to the point where the ISI influenced target selection. The Pakistan arrangement produced a two-month training cycle in espionage, wireless communication, bomb-making, and firing for three batches of forty cadres. This material is immensely valuable because it shows how a movement founded on local grievances became strategic through foreign sanctuary, intelligence patronage, and clandestine procurement. That is the hinge on which a domestic insurgency turns into a regional security problem. The stories of these missions are written in a very engrossing way, almost taking the reader through these very dangerous expeditions.

Several episodes illuminate that transformation with unusual force. Operation Golden Bird reconstructs the vulnerability of insurgent columns returning from arms collection in Bangladesh, and the coordination problems surrounding India-Myanmar operations. Operation All Clear in Bhutan is a watershed: a sanctuary system painstakingly built over years collapsed under coordinated pressure, with large weapons recoveries and severe losses. These chapters demonstrate a larger truth: sanctuaries prolong insurgency, but they also create fixed assets that can become catastrophic liabilities once host-state tolerance ends.

The chapter on the Chittagong arms haul performs a similar function. The 2004 haul exposed an international conspiracy involving weapons manufactured by the Chinese North Industries Corporation

⁵ Rupak Bhattacharjee, “Chittagong Tribunal Verdict and Its Implications,” IDSA Comment, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, April 3, 2014, 1–2, <https://idsa.in/publisher/comments/chittagong-tribunal-verdict-and-its-implications>

(NORINCO)⁶ and funds procured from Pakistan. Whether one accepts every strand of that interpretation, the analytical significance is unmistakable. The Chittagong episode shows that ULFA's capacity cannot be understood through Assam alone. What sustained the insurgency at critical junctures were procurement routes, state-linked facilitators, intelligence relationships, borderland concealment, and the riveting stories that connect the journeys. Local militancy and cross-border terror logistics are, therefore, not separate domains. They can be mutually constitutive.

Factionalism And The Hollowing Out Of Political Authority

The book is also perceptive on factionalism, especially the tension between Paresh Baruah's military hard line and the political wing around Arabinda Rajkhowa. The military wing's tendency to overshadow the political leadership is a recurring insight. The top-level struggle between Baruah and Rajkhowa is given a striking institutional marker: the last executive council meeting was held at Sherpur in Bangladesh in 2003, when the political wing of the outfit was abolished. That is one of the book's most revealing details that it brings into the public record (Bhattacharyya, chapters 7, 9, 10). It suggests that ULFA's fragmentation was not merely the result of counter-insurgency pressure from outside. It was also the result of internal organizational decisions that hollowed out political deliberation and strengthened coercive command. Once that happened, negotiations became inherently harder because the movement increasingly lacked a unified center of political authority.

Perhaps the sharpest example of ideological contradiction comes from Bhattacharyya's discussion of Bangladesh. ULFA's anti-immigrant

⁶ Bhattacharjee, "Chittagong Tribunal Verdict," 1-2; and "Babar, Nizami among 11 New Accused," *The Daily Star*, June 26, 2011, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-191729>



politics did not prevent it from seeking sanctuary in Bangladesh. To secure its position there, the outfit issued a 1992 booklet condemning the Assam Agitation as “based on emotions” while praising the role of Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam. Read alongside the narrative of Pakistan-linked training and the Dhaka sanctuary, this becomes one of the book’s strongest analytical moments. Insurgencies do not merely cross borders; they can be politically transformed by the demands of sanctuary. The host geography not only protects the movement. It can reorder its rhetoric, distort its priorities, and separate the armed leadership from the social world in whose name it speaks. The title earns its force here: the dawn was not only deferred; it was compromised by the very structures that kept the movement alive.

Reading ULFA Through Established Literature

Read through the lens of insurgency theory, the book becomes even more impressive. Paul Staniland’s work on insurgent cohesion argues that prewar social networks and the strength of horizontal and vertical ties shape how rebel organizations mobilize, control territory, and survive wartime shocks.⁷ That framework fits Bhattacharyya’s account unusually well. ULFA’s early linkage to the emotional and political ecosystem that also fed AASU and AGP helps explain why it could emerge as something more than a conspiratorial cell. It had access to grievance, local legitimacy, and political socialization. But the same framework also clarifies the later story: the weakening of vertical ties with Assamese society, the abolition of the political wing, and the hardening of military command all point toward a movement whose internal architecture became increasingly brittle. Bhattacharyya gives us the material for a

⁷ Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 1–14, 17–34.

Staniland-style reading even when he does not explicitly frame it as such.

The book also speaks directly to the growing scholarship on rebel governance. Rebel groups often do far more than fight: they build political institutions, regulate commercial production, seek civilian compliance through a mix of coercion and service provision, and attempt legitimacy enhancement.⁸ Bhattacharyya's account of ULFA's "parallel government" and Robin Hood image fits that literature precisely. Yet the book is equally valuable because it shows how rebel governance can rot. Insurgents face a choice between an institutionalized political order and a violence-mediated economy in which the civilian population becomes a resource to be extracted. ULFA's trajectory suggests movement from the first aspiration toward the second temptation. Once extortion, secrecy, and coercive survival outgrew normative authority, legitimacy naturally decayed. The book may not theorize this transformation explicitly, but it documents it well enough for the reader to see the pattern.

The treatment of counterinsurgency is also theoretically suggestive. David Kilcullen, in his works, has argued that insurgency is a struggle over contested political space and that effective counterinsurgency depends heavily on information, legitimacy, and the population's acceptance of state action.⁹ That is how Bhattacharyya's discussion of Operation Bajrang can be read here. The operation's

⁸ Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly, eds., *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–20; and Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 3–22.

⁹ David J. Kilcullen, "Three Pillars of Counterinsurgency," U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Conference, Washington, DC, September 28, 2006, 3–4; and Kilcullen, "Counter-Insurgency Redux," *Survival* 48, no. 4 (2006): 111–30, esp. 111–17.



limited success, the army's early strikes on vacated camps, and the alienating effect of human-rights abuses on the local population—this is not a sentimental criticism of force. It is a strategic one. Force without actionable intelligence can be tactically noisy and politically self-defeating. The description of Bajrang and the later improvement under Operation Rhino captures a classic problem in counter-insurgency: coercion may disrupt, but without information and legitimacy, it rarely settles. Stathis Kalyvas's work on violence in civil war makes a parallel point, distinguishing between different forms of coercion and the information environments that shape them.¹⁰ The book gives those abstract arguments a concrete Assamese setting.

Finally, the book is an exemplary case for theories of external sanctuary. Research on transnational rebellion argues that because state power stops at borders, insurgents often internationalize to evade repression, mobilize resources, and sustain conflict. Idean Salehyan's work is especially relevant here: rebel groups with external sanctuaries are often able to prolong wars that might otherwise collapse.¹¹ Bhattacharyya's reconstruction of ULFA across Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan, and China is almost a textbook demonstration of that logic. But the book also suggests a refinement. Sanctuary may preserve an insurgency organizationally while degrading it politically. It can lengthen armed relevance even as it shortens social legitimacy. That is one reason the ULFA story is so important. Cross-border support is not

¹⁰ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 146–72, 173–209.

¹¹ Idean Salehyan, "Transnational Rebels: Neighboring States as Sanctuary for Rebel Groups," *World Politics* 59, no. 2 (January 2007): 217–42, esp. 217–18, 221–23, 233–37; and Salehyan, *Rebels without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 1–8, 42–43.

only a force multiplier. It can also become a trap that keeps an outfit alive after its political imagination has begun to fail.

The Limits Of The Book

The book has limitations, though they are limitations of method and framing more than of seriousness. The first concerns source transparency. Many interviewees are identified simply as “ULFA functionary,” making it difficult at times to judge precisely how much weight to assign to particular claims. In a book built so heavily on insider testimony, that becomes crucial. Insurgent memoir, recollection, justification, score-settling, and retrospective self-exculpation are never cleanly separable. Bhattacharyya is clearly aware of the problem and tries to cross-check through officers, official affidavits, and other accounts, but an attentive reader might still want a sharper sense of who is speaking from where in the organizational hierarchy, from which period, and with what stakes. That is not a failure of the book. It is an unavoidable tension in writing histories of underground movements. Still, it remains a real methodological reservation.

A second limitation is that the book is stronger as organizational and strategic history than as social history from below. The text does engage questions of gender, caste, and class, but the emotional center remains the organization: leaders, camps, operations, procurement, splits, and negotiations. One comes away wanting more sustained civilian texture—especially from victims of ULFA violence, women beyond the insurgent hierarchy, families shaped by extortion and fear, and everyday Assamese life under the shadow of insurgency and counter-insurgency. The most important political question about ULFA is not only how it armed itself, but how ordinary consent hardened,



thinned, and finally evaporated. The book gives part of that answer, but not all of it.

A third limitation is theoretical. Bhattacharyya's instinct is journalistic rather than conceptual, and that is often a strength. The prose avoids heavy abstraction and allows evidence to do the work. Yet the material cries out in parts for a more explicit analytical frame. Comparisons with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)¹², NSCN factions, the Maoists, or even the Irish Republican Army (IRA)¹³ would have clarified what made ULFA distinctive and what made it typical. Bhattacharyya sees ULFA as second only to the LTTE in the scale of the international network created to sustain its campaign. But that comparative claim is more provocative than fully explored. The book also invites, without fully systematizing, a sharper distinction between insurgency, terrorism, criminalization, and political rebellion. That distinction should be noted because ULFA was all of these at different moments and in different proportions. A more explicit theoretical chapter might have deepened the book's utility for security scholars without diminishing its readability.

There are also practical irritants. The endnotes and references are accessed via a QR code—an innovative but perhaps inelegant solution for a work that serious readers will want to use closely. There are some naming inconsistencies and dating issues. In a book this detailed, better maps, timelines, and organizational charts would have been enormously helpful, especially for readers new to Northeast India. The inclusion of maps when describing the trails and terrain of the journeys would have

¹² Kristian Stokke, "Building the Tamil Eelam State: Emerging State Institutions and Forms of Governance in LTTE-Controlled Areas in Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (2006): 1021–40; and Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*, 141–78.

¹³ Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1–16, 79–140, 335–66.

been valuable. Yet these are curable defects, not structural flaws. They do not reduce the book's value. They simply remind us that a definitive narrative on a difficult insurgency can still benefit from a stronger scholarly apparatus.

Reasons To Read This Book Now

The final reason to read *ULFA: The Mirage of Dawn* is that it helps explain why peace in Assam is both more real and less final than celebratory official discourse sometimes suggests. The 2023 settlement with the pro-talks ULFA faction is unquestionably a milestone. The Home Ministry's own documents describe it as requiring the abjuration of violence, the surrender of all arms and ammunition, the disbandment of the armed organization, and participation in the democratic process.¹⁴ But Bhattacharyya's work makes clear why one accord cannot be treated as closure. The anti-talks faction remains tied to a Myanmar or China-based sanctuary, and the broader strategic environment on the India-Myanmar frontier has changed profoundly since the 2021 coup. Northeastern rebel outfits have been regrouping in Myanmar. Post-coup turmoil has altered the Tatmadaw's relations with armed groups, and new opportunities for borderland reorganization have emerged. Even if the banned ULFA-Independent¹⁵ is weaker than in the past, the geography that once sustained it has not disappeared.

¹⁴ India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Annual Report 2023-2024 (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024), 21, para. 2.55, https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/AnnualReport_27122024.pdf; and Press Information Bureau, "Memorandum of Settlement Signed," December 29, 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1991608>

¹⁵ India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Tribunal, "In the Matter of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA)," *Gazette of India*, Extraordinary, Part II, sec. 3(ii), S.O. 2327(E), May 26, 2025, 3-8, paras. 9-20, <https://egazette.gov.in/WriteReadData/2025/263376.pdf>



That is why the book is timely in a deeper sense. It is not only about ULFA. It is about how insurgencies are born from recognizable grievances, internationalized by sanctuary, prolonged by neighboring states' ambiguities, hardened by organizational militarization, and finally hollowed out when coercion outlives legitimacy. Bhattacharyya's most serious achievement is to show that decline is not the same as resolution. A movement can lose popular support, split repeatedly, and still persist through borderland refuge and symbolic residue. This makes the book indispensable for students and readers of security studies, terrorism and insurgency, Northeast India, and South Asian geopolitics. Policymakers should read it for its anatomy of sanctuary and negotiation. Journalists should read it for its standard of field-based reconstruction. And anyone interested in the political history of modern Assam should read it because it shows, with unusual patience, how a promise of liberation became a mirage without ever becoming irrelevant.

Note on the Reviewer

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