

RENDEZVOUS WITH REBELS: JOURNEY TO MEET INDIA'S MOST WANTED MEN

by

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Rendezvous With Rebels: Journey to Meet India's Most Wanted Men authored by Rajeev Bhattacharyya; Harper Collins Publishers India, 2014. Paperback. Price Rs. 399, ISBN 9789351363163

An exclusive interview of any one among the Chief of Staff of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) PareshBaruah, Chairman of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (K) S.S. Khaplang, or President of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) I.K. Songbijit - could be a lifetime dream for any journalist working in Northeast India. Rajeev Bhattacharyya has just accomplished all of those and even more on a single go. *Rendezvous with Rebels* is that rare chronicle of that daring three months and twenty days (800 KM) long trek into the hearts of rebel bases in Eastern Nagaland, which covers parts of Myanmar's Sagaing Division. This was the first major adventure of any Indian journalist into the hearts of the dreaded territory in a decade.

The book is, thus, not only a mere travelogue but an account of one of the most daring venture of an Indian journalist as well as a political account of a critical journalist who analyses the sub-national demands of separate geo-political entities in the region, juxtaposing the reality of personal experience with the nation-state superstructure. Moreover, the book provides a thorough understanding of the region, its people and the politics that lies within.

This book has eight chapters and an epilogue. We shall briefly take a chapter-wise review of the book to understand how the author negotiated his journey from India to the other as well as beyond the Indian paradigm of Nagaland in specific, and of Northeast India in general. The story starts with the arrest of the ULFA Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa and his colleague on 5th December, 2009, sketching the bigger picture of the rise and fall of popularity of ULFA in Assam, Operation All Clear in Bhutan in 2003 and the rise of the Awami League Govt in Bangladesh in 2008, only to focus how the absconding ULFA Chief Paresh Barua was the most wanted man. The chapter briefs us on issues like the rise of insurgency in India's Northeast, anti-foreigner agitations, the contested necessity of formation of the ULFA, its fight for Assamese sovereignty and some senseless killings and bombings. An important point Bhattacharyya made here is that behind the crimes committed by ULFA was incitement of the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI, which could assert strong hold on ULFA leaders after they were flushed out of Bhutan.

In his first chapter *On the Trail*, the author narrates his assignment that he and Paresh Baruah had agreed upon over mail and phone. He was to be accompanied by his colleague Pradip Gogoi, a video and photo journalist on this historic journey. The chapter provides an illustrating account of their beginning of tedious trek as he tackles mishaps of rolling downhill and undertakes stealthy crosses alongside Assam Rifles camps ready to shoot them down at sight.

In the second chapter *Hills Comes Alive*, the adventures proceed along the magnificent terrains full of danger with every step as the team steps ahead into the steep zigzag routed hillocks of eastern Nagaland. The NSCN (K) governs the area and nothing proceeds without their permission. Set in these grim settings, the account turns out to be rather interesting potpourri as their small contingent proceeds with Myanmar Army hunting for outfit's camps around the vicinity of the hills they traverse. His account also explains the historical background of massive acceptance of Christianity among the natives who dwell in these hills despite the fact that the neo-Christians didn't go on to change the traditional culture of theirs. It also mentions how NSCN (K) is linked to the people of the villages under the jurisdiction it controls.

In *Valley of No Return*, the third chapter of the book, the author recalls that it was this journey paths where in 1942, thousands of British personnel and workers would land safely and trek back to India after being flogged out by the Japanese from Myanmar during the World War II. Bhattacharyya's journey keeps unfolding as they walk deeper into the rocky banks of an unpredictable landscape, camping in areas infested with wild animals and scores of diseases that come when you have to live for weeks in jungle, a dangerous encounter with wild boar, malaria, blast fishing etc. The moment was at hand finally when the author gets to meet PareshBaruah, one of the most wanted men in India.

In the fourth chapter - *Chief and I*, the author starts with prolific narration on the Chief starting from his childhood and his reasons to form the revolutionary outfit. The escapes from various plans drawn by his 'enemies' to eliminate the leader were detailed as well. Through a series of discussion and interviews, the author digs out interesting and important issues with the ULFA Chief of Staff providing limited and carefully answered opinions, determinations, philosophy, logic, information, objectives, future goals and denials and corrections of speculations and rumors that surrounded ULFA and Baruah. The interview crisscrossed across a wide array of topics on over-ground talks with Rajkhowa, splits within the organization, future plans, secret killings, surrenders, recruitment, discipline, capital punishment etc. The author describes the training camp and the kind of training that the cadres receive in the camp.

Chapter Five - *Arms and Rebels* focuses on the funding, international diplomacy, hostile relationships, arms trade in the Northeast India along with the entire Southern Asia and the kind of network it prevails. The episode starts with the arrival of new consignment of weapons and the immediate rush in the camp. The last interview with the chief was also conducted on a number of issues. The invitation to interview the NSCN (K) Chairman S.S Khaplang, and an opportunity to visit the camps of NDFB, UPPK and other rebel outfits added additional glitz to the credibility and relevance of the book in understanding the inter-outfit relationship that has kept the rebel outfits active in the region despite decades of flush-out efforts by the Indian Government.

In *The Realm of Baba*, the sixth chapter of the book, the author meets the NDFB president I.K Songbijit in a camp of NDFB and discusses the organization. Then he meets the elusive NSCN (K) chief S.S Khaplang, better known as 'Baba', who controls the Eastern Nagaland, at his camp, and interviews him on issues ranging from his take on the Naga movement, NNC, NSCN, GPRN, communication, opium addiction, Indian government and its policies and the rebel outfit's take on education. The chapter ends with an account of discussions between the author and ULFA chief of staff PareshBaruah on issues of joint alliance of all the rebels groups, future constitution should all rebel groups have to function together, joint command, politics, issues related to operation of the military etc. The author has made this chapter extremely insightful with critical analysis of future plans of the Northeast rebel groups for forming a Government in Exile. It outlined the underlying strategic bonding amongst most rebel groups of the region mustered and realized by S.S Khaplang which has made kept the rebel economy and their politics striving despite pressure from the state actors and the formation of a 'United Front' comprising of all rebel groups of India's Northeast and comments on the implications the nexus might cast on the local geo-politics.

The seventh chapter of the book *Blood Sweat and Tears* is about the combined history of the various communities that borders the region. The Naga movement, KIA, International diplomacy, and the rise of insurgency are carefully elaborated. The chapter also gives an extensive account of the struggle of the Nagas, the change in politics, society, economy and diplomacy in both eastern and western fronts, and Khaplang's rise to power and becoming an essential key role to the movement.

In Chapter 8 - *Missing in Action*, the author lays out of the story of his return and the reason that catalyzed it. Their secret journey to Eastern Nagaland has been leaked as a news as two journalists being supposedly kidnapped and apprehended for a ransom. The duo has been missing almost for three months and their real truth thus got busted in the camps. The secret had been out and they had to return before further trouble crops up. The adventure is to come to an end and a hint of a *Bihu* celebration is the only dateline to leave the camps and return home. In the *Epilogue*, the author finally returns home, only

to face a volley of accusations, criticisms, charges, and a long trail of investigation by sleuths all of which he managed to dismiss or tackle properly.

Rendezvous with Rebels: Journey to Meet India's Most Wanted Men is, thus, a satisfactory and a very valuable chronicle of a journalist trying to figure out the geopolitics and organization of rebel outfits of India's Northeast. However, the book would have more valuable had some more background information was provided at the end. The author clarified at the very outset that even though it is a travelogue, it is not a conventional one; nor it is a political disquisition. Even then, if we see from an academic point of view, since the book lies between a travelogue and a political account, systematically arranged background information such as timelines of events, brief biographical sketches of the characters etc. if were arranged at the end as additional store of information, that could have been a considerable value addition.