Background
My best memories associated with rice from childhood include walking through the lush green paddy fields to catch fish in the shallow waters, collecting leftover paddy strings post-harvest for keepsake and jumping on the mounds of rice hay in the winter sun. But the first opportunity to ‘think’ about rice in a concrete way came when HaB accepted the two panel proposals on rice submitted by me along with two colleagues, Sunilj Sarkar and Erik de Meoker, to the Asian Borderlands Conference in 2018. The panel participants shared their experiences of working with rice in Northern Thailand, West Africa, Central and Northeast India; it inspired the subsequent Kokrajhar workshop, intended to initiate a dialogue on rice as a site of knowledge and meaning.

Context and intent
While ‘rice as food’ brings rice growing communities together, the complexity lies not just in the cultivation of rice, but also in the ways in which rice figures as a vehicle of shared meaning and self-identification. The crucial role rice has played historically, in building civilizations and in the formation of powerful states cannot be overlooked, even as the colonial perception of ‘rice as a food-crop’ continues to dominate the global narrative on rice. Given the influence of science and technology on agricultural practices, particularly in the western world, the importance of ‘embedded knowledge’ still prevalent among rice-growing communities across the world has gained new significance, calling for writing new histories focusing on rice cultivation using HaB’s methodological entry points of food, practice, word and place.

The two-day workshop in Kokrajhar (5–6 January 2019), organised by Ambedkar University Delhi in collaboration with IAS and INTACH (Delhi), initiated a dialogue between (four) different communities on the tradition and experience of growing rice. This workshop was planned in the context of the IAS initiative Humanities across Borders (HaB) that aims to share human experiences, with an objective to document and record the changing aspects of contemporary societies, and to use them as pedagogical tools.

Humanities across Borders Workshop
Kokrajhar, Assam, India
5–6 January 2019

Setting the stage
The most challenging task was to bring different community members onto a single platform, considering the sensitive atmosphere and in and around the district of Kokrajhar. Fortunately, it was made possible as an insider, as much as I was an outsider of having lived outside, to identify with objectively. Of the four communities (Boro, Angikongbo Bodo, Rabha, Rajbongsi and Santha), invited, the Santhals participants failed to show up (even after confirming). All participants worked as full-time rice farmers, except for one retired government employee, who continued to be engaged with rice cultivation. There were two local (female) observers invited, one a physics teacher at the Kokrajhar Government College and the other a state government employee.

The format of the workshop was kept informal. In the auditorium of the Kokrajhar Science College, with plastic chairs arranged in a semi-circle, provided the desired ambiance for a friendly discussion. Displayed in front of the group were tools and implements used for rice cultivation, along with samples of paddy leaving during the paddy field visit. This is where I saw the long-stemmed baodhan (also called Bowa) for the first time, having heard of it innumerable times in folktales during my childhood. Not grown on a large scale anymore, baodhan is unique in its size and considered vital to the ecosystem due to its height. This mode of interaction instantly generated the required interest to encourage the participants. The workshop focussed on the material artefacts of rice, their names in different dialects, specific and private knowledge, and the critical challenges faced by all farmers in the region, from shrinking farm land, to costly labour, erratic rain and flood situation, which may rain drastically on farmers’ income. The participants were interested in learning about the wet rice cultivation using HaB’s methodological entry points of food, practice, word and place, and were keen to have a concrete outcome of the workshop.

Outcome/Next Steps
Upon reflection, we realised that the workshop had effectively ‘set the stage’ for further exploration with other colleagues in the HaB network. Vernacular naming and classification of terms related to rice varieties, tools, techniques and cultivation practices, seed conservation and sharing, rice seed cultivation, rice basing, rice basing, and challenges faced by all farmers may have been valuable. The most pressing issues related to land, labour and cost of rice cultivation in present time, the common problems and conflicts, including the developmentalist agenda vs cultivating indigenous rice varieties introduced by state and market agencies vs cultivating indigenous rice varieties practiced in small communities, are in community-based knowledge practices, can resist being subsumed under discourses of ‘culture’ and ‘indigenous’ in a world where modern communities themselves value rice as self.