

An inter-community dialogue on rice as a site of knowledge and meaning

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Humanities across Borders Workshop
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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.

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, Surajit Sarkar and Erik de Maaker, 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-identity construction. 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. With 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 cartographies of rice in a global context.¹

The workshop aimed to help community members realize the significance of sharing knowledge about rice, and its relevance in

sustaining livelihoods in the region. Reflecting on Japanese self-identity construction through rice over time, in her book *Rice as Self* (1993), Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney says that rice, when used as a metaphor to think about oneself ..., often prompts people to think about who they are in relation to other peoples.² Significantly, the workshop in Kokrajhar explored lesser-known aspects of the socio-cultural dynamics of rice cultivation in Assam and the relevance of an inter-community dialogue mediated by scholars and other local stakeholders in the field.

For nearly two decades, during the Bodo movement for separate statehood (Bodoland), Kokrajhar was a major conflict zone; the ethnic conflicts have had serious implications for inter community interactions. Kokrajhar is home to many indigenous communities who share common socio-cultural attributes and historical experiences. These communities, having co-existed for generations, developed an understanding for each other's ecosystems. For generations, the traditional method of wet rice cultivation has been practiced, with negligible mechanisation, but environmental changes have made growing rice a challenging job for them all. The communities have a rich oral tradition and knowledge-practices around rice, often articulated in the form of culturally embedded narratives.

The workshop was one way of bringing together different community members residing in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) areas of Kokrajhar district, to share their ideas, knowledge and experiences of engaging with rice cultivation. The idea that a 'dynamic knowledge repository' based on generational transmission of community knowledge can be a useful and effective pedagogical tool contributed to conceiving the dialogue based workshop. It also allowed members of different communities to reconnect using oral narratives around a common object, rice, they identify with closely, and engage in a meaningful discussion touching upon larger issues of livelihood,

challenges and socio-cultural dynamics in a transformed space and time. This workshop was to become a space for developing ideas for rethinking university curricula in collaboration with local communities engaged in rice-cultivation using HaB's methodological entry points of food, practice, word and place.

Setting the stage

The most challenging task was to bring different community members onto a single platform, considering the sensitive atmosphere 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/anglicised Bodo, Rabha, Rajbongshi and Santhal) invited, the Santhal participants failed to show up (even after confirming). All participants worked as fulltime 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 and the auditorium hall of the Kokrajhar Science College, with plastic chairs arranged in a semi-circle, provided the desired ambience for a friendly discussion. Displayed in front of the group were tools and implements used for rice cultivation, along with samples of paddy collected during the pre-workshop field visit. This is where I saw the long stemmed *baodhan* (also called *Bawa*) 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 appearance and considered flood resistant due to its height. This mode of interaction instantly generated the required interest to engage the participants. The first day of the workshop focussed on the material artefacts of rice, their names in different dialects, specific and general uses, importance in traditional methods of rice cultivation and why some varieties of rice have disappeared from the fields. The free-flowing discussion also included local knowledge about seeds, methods of sowing, soil quality, required amounts of water, the timing of sowing, transplanting (*khatia/kotia*) and preservation. The rich conversations opened new queries that continued over lunch where we tasted the distinct flavour of rice as a staple to a traditional Boro meal at the famous Aai Hotel (Mother's Hotel).

After lunch we visited the village of the Boro participant, Satyendra Brahma, a 40 minute ride from Kokrajhar by tuktuk, on a road passing through open fields and green vegetation. As it was harvest time, we were able to see on our arrival the innovative ways of winnowing, and the simple handmade bamboo tools. It was here that we were shown the indigenous method of seed preservation called *majili*; seeds are preserved in straw, layered and woven tightly to keep them insulated safely from the elements. This traditional method was common in the area until most farming households started instead to use plastic or tin containers, which protect well against rodents but unfortunately damage the quality of seeds due to the temperatures created.

The second day of the Workshop began with a visit to the house of the Rajbongshi resource

person, Debeshwar Rai, just 10 minutes from the venue. The aim of the visit was to see the way in which rice plays a central role in the everyday life of women in a rice-farming household. This is more so during harvest time (winter), which is celebrated in the *bhogali bihu* festival (*Domashi* for the Boro) by preparing varieties of sweet and savoury rice treats. The visit was most rewarding in terms of understanding the community engagement and collective organisational spirit that plays a crucial role in the transmission of knowledge. The take away from the visit was that rice is central to knowledge production at a familial and community level, and the meanings associated with rice articulate the socio-cultural nuances not directly evident to the outsider.

The second half of the day was the concluding session, in which the resource persons and observers met again at the venue to sum up the workshop. I must say it was an intense session with serious discussions on issues related to land, labour and cost of rice cultivation in present time. The discussion also revealed the social dynamics that exist between different communities vis-à-vis rice, e.g., how they perceive each other as a community and why there is disparity between farming communities. The memory of *maibra* rice ball (sticky rice ball) that we used to carry while playing after school became vivid while discussing the disappearance of the indigenous rice varieties, which were replaced by the government-introduced hybrid ones, particularly the Ranjit variety, grown by almost all farmers since a decade or so. As a high yielding variety it is economical and appears to also have a better taste than many other hybrid varieties; followed by *Gopal Bhog*, which is scented and by name suggestive of a divine food from West Bengal. Such shifts are happening amidst complex socio-cultural contexts as representative of community negotiation at multiple levels. This has caused the disappearance of most local and indigenous varieties like *Jwsa/joha* (scented), *phoolpakhri* (mix coloured), *maima* (proto type), *Asu/Ahu* (for security/as dependable type), *mai dulut* (round type), which are now grown primarily for occasional consumption, thus making them very expensive for consumers as well as for the cultivators. The common problems and challenges faced by all farmers in the region, range from shrinking farm land, to costly labour, erratic rain and flood situation, no government support for seed purchase, disinterest in farming activities among the younger generation, and, most importantly, the conflict between cultivating high-yielding varieties introduced by state and market agencies vs cultivating indigenous rice varieties. The latter, embedded as they are in community-based knowledge practices, can resist being subsumed under discourses of 'culture' or 'sustainable development' only when communities themselves value rice as self.

Outcome/Next Steps

Upon reflection, we realised that the workshop had offered us with themes 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 snack cultures, rice beer, and so much more. The question of the developmentalist agenda through state intervention in rice practices in India's north-east, intersects with the bordering regions of northern Thailand and Myanmar. Finally, the issue of the commercialisation of rice has implications for seed sovereignty, and has triggered the idea of creating a community based seed bank as part of Ambedkar University Delhi's project under the HaB, as one of the concrete outcomes of the workshop.

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Notes

- 1 Bray, F. et al. (eds) 2015. *Rice: Global Networks and New Histories*. Cambridge University Press.
- 2 Ohnuki-Tierney, E. 1993. *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time*. Princeton University Press.