

The Indo-Assam Conflict, the Assam Accord and the Unpleasant Bitter Gourd

Abantee Dutta

Abstract

Using the taste metaphor of the bitter gourd, this reflection engages the readers in an exploration of the author's experiences of the Indo-Assam conflict, as a child and later as an adult. The piece dwells on the nuances of the conflict, the impact of it as witnessed by the author in her everyday life, friendships and the society she inhabits. Some of the bitter and inconvenient truths of Assam, and the never-ending struggle for durable peace are explored. The reflection grapples with two main questions: How can the multiple narratives of the Indo Assam conflict be (re)framed? How can the present discourse be re-humanized? In exploring these questions, the author offers a re(reading) of the Assam Accord of 1985, explains how it (re)shapes her understanding of conflict and peace as an Assamese.

Author Profiles

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Introduction

The Bitter Gourd or Tita Kerala, in Assamese, is quite the beloved of many. But what would the bitter gourd have to do with conflicts and peace accords? Nothing perhaps. In my everyday life, however, I find that taste and smell metaphors embody and bring some radical epistemological moments. For instance, I occasionally have to sniff out hidden truths, or swallow, unpleasant bitter ones. I am no expert on gender, except that my experience of the world is gendered. I am an action researcher and my ways of knowing encourages me to access knowledge that is embodied in our life experiences. Deeply inspired by the works of Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, I believe in extending epistemologies to access knowledge relevant to people's local realities and in a language that they find meaningful.

Here, have some bitter gourd slices.

....

dry, brown, and crisp to the seed,
stir-fried, with just enough salt, over a slow fire.¹

In our family, the bitter gourd is my mother's favorite although I personally detest it. Whenever my mother and I quarrel and making amends become difficult, I am inclined to serve her a dish of bitter gourd as a dish of reconciliation. She likes it fine sliced and deep fried with onion and potatoes. But my aversion to it prevents me from doing so. In my youth, I used to find this fruit ugly and be abhorrently horrified with its taste. It was repulsive and best avoided. However, as an adult, I am much more tolerant and appreciate its inherent health benefits but would still resist having it under most circumstances. Quite intriguingly, conversations with friends and family about Assam and its conflicts mirror my experiences with the bitter gourd. They trigger a gastronomic anxiety, a stubborn hesitation to engage, and a revulsion which often leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. In this reflection, I use the bitter gourd as a metaphor to reflect on my experiences of the Indo-Assam conflict and how it (re) shapes my understanding of the conflict and offer an alternate perspective on the Assam Accord of 1985.

Unpleasant Bitter Truths: A Few Slices of Assam and The Indo-Assam Conflict

Peel my skin, rub in salt --
marinate in curds, or spice me sharp.
Keep me whole, slit on the side;
shred fine or slice me large.

¹ Translated from Hindi, Anand Thakore. Bitter Gourd. *Indian Literature*, 49 (4) (228) (July- August): 56

Leave no fluid, fry till dry;
cook me rare or bake on high.
Garnish with garlic, stuff onions;
blend in sugar or lace with mint.

Assam, my homeland, is the periphery state of India, part of a region called “Northeast,” which includes Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. Until the mid 1960s, Assam constituted nearly the entire Northeast and has always been a region of immigration hosting new generations and numerous major indigenous communities making it one of the most heterogeneous regions of the world. Postcolonial Assam, however, has witnessed multiple partitions into smaller States which has had serious ramifications for the region. Driven by center periphery asymmetries mobilizing around issues of identity, land, migration and resource management, the periphery state continues to endure numerous intractable conflicts and has been enmeshed in what some term as the “crisis of citizenship”.²

With all its cartographic experiments, Assam has been noted by scholars to be one of the most precarious political systems in the world.³ Its precarity is characterized by the fact that none of the ethnic groups that constitute its demography enjoys a majority. Communities continue to govern themselves through elite coalitions, territorial decentralization and electoral arrangements. As experienced by other states like Northern Ireland and Malaysia, such arrangements are often so precarious that any demographic change, result of differential natural population growth rates among ethnic groups, immigration etc. can disrupt the political system.⁴ Assam thus continues to be turbulent and embroiled in a crisis of its citizenry and struggles with the question of “who is an Assamese” and “who is indigenous” to the region.

The dominant narrative, that I inherited, projects Assam as the home of a large constituency of Muslim peasants from East Pakistan (Bangladesh), who had, for decades, entered the state in search of land and opportunities, a policy which was encouraged during pre-Partition India by the British colonial regime. In the wake of the disintegration of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh in 1971, Assam (re)emerged as a sanctuary state for the huge movement of refugees (mostly Bengali Hindus) from Bangladesh. The folklore tells the narrative of continued “illegal” migration to Assam, even after the creation of Bangladesh which snowballed into a huge crisis over assertion of ethnic identities, anxiety over control of resources, culminating in mass agitation called the Assam Agitation led by civil society groups and student organizations from 1979-1985.

The decade long agitation culminated in the signing of the Assam Accord between the Government of India and the leaders of the All Assam Students Union as representatives of the people of Assam. The Assam Accord guaranteed that anyone who had entered Assam (from Bangladesh) until March 1971 would become a “deemed citizen” of India.⁵ However, post

² Sanjay Borbora. The crisis of citizenship in Assam. *The India Forum* (May 16, 2019). Retrieved from: <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/crisis-citizenship-assam>.

³ Myron Weiner. 1978. *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Clause 5 of Assam Accord : “ Foreigners Issue: 5.1 For purposes of detection and deletion of foreigners, 1.1.1966 shall be the base date and year.; 5.2 All persons who came to Assam prior to 1.1.1966, including those amongst them whose name appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections, shall be regularized.; 5.3 Foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and upto 24th March, 1971 shall be detected

1971, all irregular migrants from Bangladesh would have to be detected, deleted from the electoral rolls and deported as articulated in Clause 5.⁶ For this, there was an agreement to draw up a National Register of Citizens (NRC). This latter part of the commitment was never enforced or implemented, largely for political reasons, until recently. The Assam Accord also assured to the people of Assam certain constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards and promised economic development through Clause 6 and 7 respectively, promises which are yet to be complied with by the Indian state.⁷

Lapses in implementation of the Assam Accord meant that the peace negotiations failed to bring any kind of peace to the region. Infact, the precarity of the region was left exposed and it marked, to a great extent, the beginning of the identity politics that has gripped Assam since. Emerging as the central motif in Assam's conflict landscape, the Assam Accord incited some of the most turbulent and troubled struggles in the region in the decades that followed, with demands for autonomy asserting secession from India by armed insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), territorial control over land by indigenous groups such as the Bodos', demands of social justice reflecting a desire for citizenship and equality under constitutional law for the migrants from Bangladesh or such perceived non-citizens.

Bitter Gourd is Bitter

Dip in gravy, dress me in sauce;
green I stay like a vegan cause.
Mask me with flavors, sweet, sour, hot --
bitter ever, like truth, I taste alas.⁸

As a child, born in the era immediately post Accord, I witnessed the valley encircled by mountains and the river Brahmaputra collapse into a site of numerous separatist movements and secessionist insurgencies led by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and later followed by multiple other insurgent groups such as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, the Bodo Liberation Tigers, the Kamatapur Liberation Organization, the Kuki Revolutionary Army etc. The ULFA insurgency movement emphasized the region's historical autonomy and envisioned its separation from the 'mainland'. This led to a massive infusion of national security forces into the region. I witnessed the Indian State's reaction with large-scale militarization and other covert and overt measures: brutalizing society and creating an atmosphere of violence and impunity. Words like "curfew", "blackouts", "gherao" were

in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964., 5.4 Names of Foreigners so detected will be deleted from the electoral rolls in force. Such persons will be required to register themselves before the Registration Officers of the respective districts in accordance with the provisions of the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and the Registration of Foreigners Rules, 1939.; 5.5 For this purpose, Government of India will undertake suitable strengthening of the governmental machinery.; 5.6 On the expiry of a period of ten year following the date of detection, the names of all such persons which have been deleted from the electoral rolls shall be restored.; 5.7 All persons who were expelled, earlier, but have since re-entered illegally into Assam, shall be expelled.; 5.8 Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and expelled in accordance with law. Immediate and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigners.; 5.9 The Government will give due consideration to certain difficulties expressed by the AASU/AAGSP regarding the implementation of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983"

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Clause 6: "Constitutional, Legislative & Administrative safeguards: 6. Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people. Clause 7 : Economic Development: 7. The Government takes this opportunity to renew their commitment for the speedy all-round economic development of Assam, so as to improve the standard of living of the people. Special emphasis will be placed on education and science & technology through establishment of national institutions"

⁸ Dr. Uma Asopa. Plain-speak from Bitter Gourd. Retrieved from: <https://www.boloji.com/poem/2749/plain-speak-from-bitter-gourd>>

part of my everyday vocabulary. The serene valley of Assam gradually became the “troubled periphery” and peace, a distant reality.

As a human rights activist and a lawyer, my father became deeply immersed and our family, by default, in the politics of the time. He along with two of his colleagues, Ajit Bhuyan and Parag Das founded a civil rights organization called *Manab Adhikar Sangram Samity* (MASS) which aimed to investigate and collect evidence about the excesses by the security forces on civilians and to record this new kind of *limpieza/cleansing*.⁹ My father started travelling, quite frequently to the interiors of Assam, disappearing for days on end. They meticulously documented the lives of ordinary people caught up in the crossfire and human rights violations that were being committed in the name of “security”, including rape, disappearances, torture, illegal detention, destruction of villages and property. As it were to be, my father and his colleagues soon were declared as “threats to national security” by the Government of India and consequently arrested for months without bail. As a child, I was unable to comprehend the complexity of the Indo-Assam conflict. But even now, as an adult, and despite being a peace practitioner, I often get confused and perplexed by the multi-dimensionality of the conflict.

Although the secessionist struggles have quietened (for now) and peace talks are ongoing, the valley continues to erupt, with indigenous sovereign struggles in seeking forms of autonomy and self-governance consumed by land and identity assertions underlying issues of discrimination, inequality, marginalization and exclusion. Assam is a vibrant laboratory of peace accords where peace remains elusive with the Bodo Peace Accord, 2020 being the most recent entrant. This latest accord envisages a new governance model creating the pathway for a separate state of Bodoland (in the future), fomenting yet another power struggle between the various indigenous groups and migrant communities who reside in the area.

As I reflect, to me, it occurs that the struggle for durable peace in Assam which continued with signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 has scarred public memory and left a bitter trail. People in Assam carry a deep sense of betrayal by the mainland. I bear witness to Assam’s stark economic decline that runs contrary to “acche din/ good days”, the development rhetoric of the mainland. The long chequered history of disputed citizenship, center periphery politics, relative deprivation of the communities and the militarized state apparatus has spelt catastrophic consequences on its political economy, threatening to lift the mask and reveal a fragile state. Today, there exists a deep sense of relative deprivation in the region and I have experienced this play out as assertions of rigid political identities of the indigenous communities in Assam including the Moran, Motoks, Koch Rajbonshis and the Rabhas. It has inevitably created a society based on social arrangements where all inhabitants regardless of gender, class, caste, religion have stories of who they are, how they are connected and what had happened to them.

As I read more on Assam’s history, it disturbs me that most of the causes for Assam’s continued turmoil concern its post-independence identity and failure of the Indian State to deal with Partition and its ramifications on its eastern border. It has obviously been difficult for the Assamese people to swallow the bitter fact that the promises that were made in the Assam Accord served as a dish of reconciliation are yet to be implemented. The more I think and

⁹ Michael Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This*, The University of Chicago Press, 2011

engage with Assam, the more I am persuaded by Sanjib Baruah, a keen political observer of the region, that Assam's solution has been "insufficiently imagined." Consequently, Assam today stands at the brink of a humanitarian crisis of citizenship where 1.9 million people have become non-citizens in Assam due to the exclusion of their names from the National Register of Citizens (NRC); a promise made by the Indian state which was renewed only after the lapse of 19 years, when the Supreme Court of India in 2015 initiated the process to monitor the legal status of every inhabitant of the State of Assam. What is alarming in the present is the precarity of the condition of the perceived non-citizens, as a significant proportion of them face the imminent threat of becoming stateless, subjected to a life of indefinite incarceration in the detention homes of Assam, which are yet to be built.¹⁰ I am disturbed by Tillotama (Misra) Baideo's provocation, "will the land (of red river and blue hills) soon become a museum site of detention centers?"¹¹

A tragedy continues to unfold in my homeland where two sets of vulnerable communities, i.e. the non-citizens and the indigenous communities are being pitted against each other. Assam, is a land where we are all outsiders; the question remains to what degree? My recent experience of Assam has been one of an extremely polarized society where all is suspect, fault lines hardened, and the sense of othering stands complete. Question of identity continue to play an indispensable role in facilitating or shrinking shared social spaces with the perceived "other". I am witnessing a vicious campaign unravel which seeks to silence the grievances of the vulnerable communities entangled in the conflict. Trapped in this culture of hatred and unable to ally with any one perspective, I feel completely alienated and wrestle with the question posed by Judith Butler as to "whose lives are grievable?" And I am compelled to ask,

Whose lives are valuable,
Whose lives are to be mourned
And whose lives are ungrievable.

And what are the conditions that make some lives more vulnerable than the rest.

It is also getting increasingly difficult to discuss Assam with my friends from the mainland. I am not surprised that they find it hard to fathom the harsh complexities of the Indo-Assam conflict where many treat the NRC, including the Assamese Muslims, as a lifeline and why the Assamese people insist on safeguards to preserve our identity, culture and heritage. That makes conversations quite unpleasant and best avoided.

Adding to the complexity, I struggle to watch patriarchy tighten its grip over the Assamese culture. Assam, as I have experienced it, is fairly egalitarian although many scholars of the region and elsewhere passionately challenge this proposition. Women in my life, my grandmother, mother and aunts, and women I have met elsewhere in Assam (have been and) are mostly independent, strong-willed, hardworking and self-assured. Most women in Assam, as compared to the mainland, enjoy equal access to education and life opportunities. It's not strange therefore to meet many inspiring women in leadership roles as social and business entrepreneurs. They also often lead as artists, writers and academics. Across the board, however, I hardly ever

¹⁰ In absence of the detention centers, six of the correctional homes in Assam have been designated as detention centers to house the non-citizens which is under challenge in the Gauhati High Court.

¹¹ Comments made by Tillotama Misra Baideo at a civil society meeting organized by Studio Nilima on NRC.

find women in leadership roles in the government, in think tanks, in the judiciary, in media or as conflict practitioners/negotiators in a region enmeshed in conflict. The virtual absence of women from decision making positions within the institutional structures is palpable. This raises the question of women's access to positions of authority and the comfort in the belief that it is "natural" for men to be leaders, especially as decision makers.

For instance, for a region, where women have always led and played pivotal roles in transforming conflicts, I am consistently struck by their absence at the peace negotiations. In all peace negotiations of Assam so far, such as the Bodo Peace Accords and even the ongoing peace talks with the members of the ULFA, there seems to be an unspoken rule where it is considered "normal" for only men to negotiate. Infact, I was most surprised to discover a deep hesitation amongst the women cadres of the ULFA in an informal meet to voice their views on the ongoing peace negotiations unlike their male counterparts. I was also surprised to discover very few insights into the effects of the conflicts on the "mothers, "wives" and children" of the ULFA cadres. At another instance, it was disappointing to hear how little the women cadres of the ULFA benefitted from the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programmes offered by the State as compared to their male counterparts.

The problem, however, is not simply that women are unable to participate. From my limited experience of leading a non-profit in Assam which works at the intersection of law, conflict and governance, I sense immense resistance from my women colleagues to engage meaningfully with politics, wrestle with ideas of governance and/or engage with the conflicts of the region. Again, in organizing dialogues around what are perceived as contemporary political concerns of our society, for instance, the crisis of citizenship, detention of non-citizens, constitutional safeguards for the "Assamese people", land reforms, I often find it challenging to persuade women to participate. They remain mostly absent as a matter of choice, at best, and/or underrepresented with their opinions drowned out in a sea of dominant male perspectives, at worse. The sheer unwillingness of majority of the women to engage is stunning and staggering. Where are the women? I stand defeated, exhausted and exasperated by their silence.

Bitter Gourd has Health Benefits?

It has been hard to swallow these unpleasant and inconvenient truths about Assam. The bitter gourd therefore remains unpleasant, the erosion continues, the land weeps and a stubborn rigidity stands vindicated. It seems I am not alone in my distaste for the bitter gourd. A simple search on "Google" would yield some fascinating results, such as, "5 easy tips to remove bitterness from bitter gourd" or, "6 amazing reasons to start eating bitter gourd." It is often suggested that the bitter gourd has multiple health benefits. Because of such reasons my friends have consistently tried to persuade me with multiple strategies (in the form of recipes) to transform this aversion and help me triumph over my childhood revulsion. "Coconut blends well with bitter gourd!" my friend suggests. Another interrupts, "Deep fry it. It transforms its bitterness making it delectable."

Blending coconut with the bitter gourd gets my attention, but a strange rigidity overpowers me from investigating. I just don't want to try! The memory of the bitter taste is so nauseating that

I stop. In an uncanny way, however, the tragic impasse that I see in the Indo-Assam conflict mirrors (somewhat) my resistance to engage creatively with the bitter gourd. The resistance impedes anyone from forging new relations. I realize that if I somehow manage to shift my attitude towards the bitter gourd, it will alter the present status quo and create new experiences. Maybe my health stands to benefit too.

For Assam, can such shifts begin with (re)framing the Assam conflict? How can we re-humanize the present discourse? Curious, I return to (re)reading the Assam Accord. The Assam Accord is sacred to us, although it has been subject to quite a few criticisms over the years. Suspending the multiple interpretations and critiques was difficult. Many view the Assam Accord as a failed document. The lack of implementation of the promises contained within it is perceived as deliberate, placing Assam at a disadvantage by privileging the perceived non-citizens over its people. The proponents of this narrative assert the promises made in Clause 6, 7 and so on to justify the betrayal of the mainland and legitimacy to the cause of the ULFA. It recalls the guarantees that were made by the Government of India to the people of Assam under Clause 5 to stop the perceived non-citizens from “swamping” minority homelands of the indigenous communities. Others have viciously leveraged the Assam Accord as a political weapon against minority communities by relying selectively on the same Clause 5 and created fractures in the citizenship practices in Assam by targeting some indigenous minority groups as “doubtful voters”, “foreigners” and “illegal migrants”. Recent times have seen a surge in writings around the Assam Agitation and the Assam Accord, 1985 which allege both to have played a pivotal role in “embedding anti-immigrant propaganda, chauvinism and xenophobia into the popular culture and state institutions in Assam.”

As I grappled with the multiple polarizing narratives of the Assam Accord, a pattern strangely emerged in all perspectives on the Accord. It was a tendency to read the parts of the Accord in isolation separated from a holistic understanding of the entire text. An attempt to arrive at a harmonious (re)reading of the entire document led me to discover Clause 4, which to me articulated the core intent of the Accord. Clause 4 declares unequivocally the ethos and commitment of the Assam Accord as one that recognizes and reiterates humanism and humanitarian principles.¹² Viewed from this lens of humanism, the Assam Accord unravels a unique perspective where the rights of the vulnerable groups are not viewed in opposition but attempts a fine balance between the interests of the non-citizens and the Assamese people. It articulates the idea of the deemed citizens in welcoming the migrants until 1971 while safeguarding the interests of the Assamese people and opening a doorway for the Indian state to take responsibility for the future. This perspective generates a space of intellectual openness and curiosity to explore a more nuanced and humane understanding of the Indo-Assam conflict. In shying away to recognize the core intent of the Assam Accord, we seem to have (unconsciously perhaps) disregarded the fluidity that the document offers, upsetting the balance between the competing interests.

Almost counter intuitively, it destabilizes the violent counter narratives that I had inherited so far. Infact, the myopic reading of the Assam Accord, so far, has brutally stifled the reason, compassion and hope that it obviously promises. I dare say that our gaze of the document is

¹² “Clause 4: Keeping all aspects of the problem including constitutional and legal provisions, international agreements, national commitments and humanitarian considerations, it has been decided to proceed as follows:...”

perverse. Such tendencies have thus long “marginalized the feminine”, constraining actions, imagination and opening up the pathway towards positive peace, which was the intent of the Assam Accord. We have continuously failed ourselves in drumming up narratives that run contrary to the true intent of the Assam Accord. Infact, as I reflect back, the multiple tracks and interpretations of the Assam Accord occurs to me as overtly masculine. Each framing is reminiscent of an approach which is linear, rigid and tends to silence all other perspectives. In recognizing the vulnerability of each of the groups and balancing their interests the Assam Accord creates the space to envision transformative resolutions premised on principles of solidarity and humanism. Our failure to grasp this opportunity reveals our collective resistance to engage with new ideas to humanize the discourse.

As I reflect now, I also realize that selective interpretation of the Assam Accord, which is the existing norm, only fuels the discourses of division and privilege one vulnerable group over the other. Such an orientation, I fathom will only continue to reproduce the very same problems and limit any sort of reframing of the present conditions and imagining new futures. Assam will continue to remain a tragedy, where the vulnerable communities will keep asserting the perceived set of competing interests against each other. The deep sense of alienation and relative deprivation experienced by the people of Assam and its indigenous communities will continue; the turbulent politics combined with the underdevelopment of the region will keep manifesting as a recurrent politics of micro nationalism against such “illegal migrants,” the allegation of violating the human rights of the migrant communities and the liberty of non-citizens will only get louder; the civil and political rights of the indigenous populations will get drowned out in the name of “human rights of minorities;” and the intention of the Assam Accord that seems to create a delicate balance between the two dominant competing interests will be silenced forever.

However, I fail to grasp why this idea of humanism has been missing from the existing discourse. Humanism as a philosophy is not alien to Assam. It is discernable in the syncretic tradition of our culture, in the teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva, in the jikiris of Azaan Pir, in the verses of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika that has shaped our consciousness, who questions,

Manuhe manuhor babe
Jodihe Okonu Nabhabe
Akanu Hahanubhutire
Bhabibo Kunenu Kuwa, Xomoniya

(“If a man does not spare a little thought for fellow humans with a little empathy, who else would think, Tell me, O friend.”)

“We become the stories that we tell”, says Sara Cobb, a narrative and conflict practitioner. As I sadly watched Assam go up in flames (yet again) in December 2019, I was convinced that the time had arrived to re-tell our stories. Assam surely is eroding itself of its humanism- the core essence of our society. Safeguards are necessary for the people of Assam, but it is equally urgent to recover the “ulah” or the fluidity to move towards a truly inclusive society. It will be challenging, however, to reframe the existing narratives into a language,

nested in the humanism as the conflict industry has become so lucrative for all. The recipe for reconciliation and peacebuilding needs other ingredients too. For one, patriarchy that masquerades itself will have to be squarely addressed. The promise of humanism is inclusivity. In (re)framing the Indo-Assam conflict therefore, we will have to be mindful to include all such perspectives that have been ravaged by it, the women specifically. The NRC process made apparent the consequences of having a non-gendered approach to peacebuilding and/or policy and planning process. The policy of establishing a claim to citizenship based on certain link documents revealed the citizenship quandary for the marginalized women who lacked the required documents as they never had any access to property or a bank account. The fall out meant that a large proportion of women from marginalized communities were excluded from the NRC. Ironically, in most cases, men within the same family had their documents in place. As Manorama Sharma observes questions of women's rights and obligation are considered irrelevant as women belongs to the private sphere, and the rights and entitlements are matters of the public domain, as the NRC process revealed. The lack of gender consciousness in the approach adopted by the administration exposed how the Indian State treats the idea of citizenship where a women's identity is derived either from her father or her husband, mirroring other patriarchal structures of the State's approach to administration, including peacebuilding efforts. It is quite obvious that structures that are inherent in our collective consciousness need a radical shift. Infact, for the Indo-Assam conflict, inclusivity would require a conscious attempt by all, including the men, to dismantle the patriarchal structures and include the women in this dialogue for peace. Inclusivity and any (re)framing would also require a language that weaves of all other marginalized voices that make up socio political landscape of Assam.

Absences, such as the ones discussed make it evident that marginalized voices in conflict, their experiences, insights and perspectives need to be made visible and more in-depth studies are necessary in the context of Assam, particularly to identify how women experience, understand and respond to conflict. It is such insights precisely that should be enough to persuade us, as a society and individually, to integrate women as key actors in any dialogue processes, such as exploring more nuanced and humane understanding of the Indo-Assam conflict.

The recent decades have seen an increasing interest, particularly in mainland India, to engage with the Indo-Assam conflict. Such engagement remains mostly colonial in their treatment of the region, delegitimizing narratives that are difficult to understand, often at the risk of doing more harm to the context. The lived experience, however, remains unpleasant for some and repulsive for others. The texture is rough and bitterness sharp. But if we are inspired to unsettle the resistance and engage wholly and anew, it may hold the cure for the cancer that threatens to disrupt the core essence of our culture- our *ulah*. For Assam, the path to reconciliation lies in how much are we willing to shift, (re)engage to (re)frame the dominant narratives.

The Indo-Assam conflict may be unpleasant, but shifts in perspectives can (re)humanize the conflict, no matter how bitter the history.

With such shifts in perspective, I prepare to cook some bitter gourd with chopped onions and curry leaves with a dash of fennel, coriander and red chili powder.