

Decolonizing Kokborok: Linguistic Resistance and Cultural Assertion in Tripura

Edeny Sajwk Debbarma¹, Dr. Jithin Joseph²

¹MA English Literature, Kristu Jayanti College Autonomous

²Teaching Professor in English, Kristu Jayanti College Autonomous

Abstract

Language plays an important role in expressing and preserving cultural identities. Indigenous languages, which serve as the foundation of the cultural identity of Indigenous sects, however, remain mostly undocumented, leaving them exposed to external influences and threat of endangerment. This paper explores *Kokborok*, the language of the indigenous people of Tripura, in the light of linguistic inversion by Bengali through migrated population from Bangladesh. *Kokborok*, as the mother tongue of Tripura's population, has primarily existed in oral tradition without an original script. With the formation of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in 1947 due to the partition of India, there was a flood of migration from Bangladesh towards the northeastern states, in which Tripura hosted many Bengali-speaking migrant populations. Though the presence of non-native speakers was evident in the state before, the heavy influence of language was evidently criticized after the state witnessed advancement in favoring newcomers with opportunities and employment. It was also bolstered by the adoption of the Bengali script for written records and official matters. Consequently, the indigenous language, *Kokborok*, became heavily influenced by the Bengali language, distorting its phonetic and structural features. This paper analyses how this linguistic imposition has misshaped pronunciation, meaning, and cultural narratives, impacting the everyday communication and identity of *Kokborok* speakers. The study also investigates the prolonged protest of the imposition of Bengali script on *Kokborok* by students, Indigenous communities, and political parties and how these contemporary protests shape measures to decolonize the language. This discourse of study considers the linguistic resistance of Tripura's population against the influence of external languages as part of the contemporary cultural and social struggles of the Northeast to establish and proclaim their own centralities.

Keywords: Kokborok, migration, cultural and language heritage,

Introduction

Tripura is one of the seven sister states of the northeastern region of India. People from Tripura are called Tripuri or Tiplasa/Twiplasa. Their indigenous language is *Kokborok* (*pronounce: kohk-boh-rok/rog*), a language branch belonging to Tibeto-Burmese (Debbarma and Debbarma). The state has 19 recognised scheduled tribes; among them, *Kokborok* is the most spoken tribal language. However, in Tripura, a unique state with a majority of non-native speakers, Bengali is the most used language as it dominates the tribal speeches (Van Schendel).

According to UNESCO, the language endangerment of the indigenous language is in an alarming phase, and one indigenous language dies every two weeks (*United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous*

Issues (UNPFII) / Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD)). Likewise, Northeast India consists of several native tongues; among 167 endangered languages in India, 67 are from Northeast India, and the northeastern region's indigenous languages are at the peak of extinction (*Cultural Invisibility – India's 600 Potentially Endangered Languages – Tribal Cultural Heritage in India*). After the announcement of the endangered language listed by UNESCO, the UGC (University Grant Commission) constituted bodies in nine universities to protect endangered indigenous languages in 2014 (Madhumita Barbora)

Kokborok is the language spoken by the indigenous people of Tripura. *Kokborok* is a combination of two words, *kok* and *borok*. Its literal translation means 'word' or 'verbal' and 'human' or 'person'. So, the two words combined translate as a 'person's word', or its meaning can be translated as a language spoken by humans.

Kokborok as a language has a history dating back to the 1st century AD, although its recognition was recently made. The first script of Kokborok was called '*koloma*' and was written in the book '*Rajratnakar*' and translated into Sanskrit and Bengali in the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively. Now the script '*koloma*' is nowhere to be found (TRIPURA and TRIPURA) which we can assume resulted in the Kokborok speakers sticking with oral form to preserve their language.

Although Kokborok is the official language of Tripura, only 25.9 percent of people speak Kokborok in the state whilst, Bengali is spoken by 67.7 percentage of population in the state (*TRIPURAINFOWAY: Tripura's Latest News, Views & IT Portal*). The main catalyst of this affected linguistic status is the demographic distribution happened due to socio-political reasons such as migration in Tripura. Tripura's total population in the year 1901 was 173,325, which gradually increased by few points in each decade. The decades between 1951 and 1961 witnessed a dramatic rise in population by 78.71 percent, even though the tribal population remained constant by 31.53 percent (Debbarma). The rise in population indicates increase of non-native speakers' settlement in Tripura after the independence. The drastic influx of migrant population and their settlement made the tribal population minority in their native land. This overwhelming growth not only effected the state's population and its geography, but it also had serious impacts on the state's socio-economic and political, linguistic, and cultural dynamics. A notable example is the introduction Bengali which lead to several significant changes in the linguistic nature of the society such as adoption of Bengali script to write Kokborok, Kokborok speaker adopting Bengali words in their regular conversation and usage of Bengali in administration, commercial and commune area.

Arrival of non-native speaker/ foreign language

The arrival of foreign languages, specifically Bengali in Tripura started in the early 14th century. In the 14th century, the king Ratna Manikya settled few Bengali speaking communities in Tripura to increase his population of subjects (Anindita Ghoshal). However, large scale migration to Tripura and other Northeastern regions from Bengali speaking regions started during partition of India and formation of Pakistan in 1947. According to the census of 1961 report, the migration was further escalated by the Bangladesh Liberation war in 1971. It can be considered as the second wave of migration Tripura hosted, in which Bengali-Hindus in large numbers moved to Tripura. As Tripura shares its 84 percentage of border with Bangladesh in West, South and North, this geographical setting makes the huge migrant population seeks settlement in Tripura, both legally and illegally. According to the recent record of 2011 census, the migration increased from 961623 to 1299623 from 2001 to 2011, respectively

(TRIPURAINFOWAY: Tripura's Latest News, Views & IT Portal). This overwhelming influx of migration pushed the tribal to become a minor community in the states resulting in the domination of Bangali in the political and administration domains.

As a language without a scrip, Kokborok, for a long time, has depended on Bengali using its scrip for writing. However, the practice of writing Kokborok in Bengali script raised concern among the tribal populous, including students, political parties, and societies as a part of raising linguistic and regional sentiments towards Tripura's waning ingenious heritage. The emerging collective desire for reviving Kokborok initiated protests against the imposition of Bengali script on Kokborok language from 1967 onwards (since the formation of TSF, student movement). Resultantly, in 1979, the Kokborok was declared an official language of the state alongside Bengali, which was already the official language. However, the Bengali speakers on the administrative offices continued imposing Bengali as a medium of education- primary, secondary, higher secondary institution; also Bengali being the second language in the higher secondary level for grades 9 and 10 (in *English medium school*). Lately, the conflict between Bengali and Kokborok has brought into discussion several concerns regarding the linguistic domination of one language over the other. The imposition of Bengali language on Kokborok lists out some of these concerns. Firstly, Bengali and Kokborok belong to two different language families with distinct linguistic structure and features. The domination of the former implies that it has devastating influence on the morphological and phonological aspects of the Kokborok. One of the notable examples is with the sound 'W' in Kokborok, which is an identity of language for Kokborok as it is the most common sound used regularly among Kokborok dialects. However, the Bengali alphabets do not have the sound 'w', and during transcription the original sound gets replaced by subsequent letters losing its originality (Hoque).

Secondly, there is a significant influence of Bengali language among the tribal as most of the working population are closely aligned with the educated majority of Bengali people, and develop or adopt Bengali speech unintentionally. For instance, Kokborok speakers' daily communication gets influenced by prevalent Bengali words like 'din', 'taka', which are used to count money in Bengali numbers and count days in the week in Bengali. This daily communication enters in the familial contexts and especially younger generation who remain unaware of these politics of language, become more expressive in foreign language.

Thirdly, the languages used in the administration and public domains are also dominated by Bengali language. The common newspaper 'Dainik Shongbat' which is written in Bengali, is one of the most circulated newspapers among the tribal households as well as Bengali households. Moreover, in the domain of educational, the government allow the students to write in their preferred script (either Bengali script or roman script) but, the question would inevitably be in Bengali script.

Kokborok's dire state of existence is chiefly attributed to the disappearance of 'koloma' script. Traditionally being illiterate and having limited access to other means of archiving the language, the Kokborok speakers adopted oral form to express and remember their culture and language heritage through storytelling or folktale. Thus, the influence of the foreign languages further disintegrates the relevance of Kokborok resulting an imminent loss of their traditional art forms.

However, the surging influence of languages like Bengalis and such on Kokborok has inspired resistance movements like TSF (Tribal Student Federation) to address the issue of script reformation in the language. Tribal Student Federation had placed a demand for Kokborok to be written in roman script in the year 1967, which remained neglected by the government of Tripura till the date (Barman). There was

a recent protest on 20th March 2025 renewing the demand for adopting roman scrip for the language (*Tripura*). This growing demand has taken the state by storm and has helped to make people aware of this issue. The prolonged protests followed that has largely invoked a common sentiment towards this issue thorough out the state. These prolong protest has two main goals: firstly, to impose roman script on Kokborok language to archive or preserve its cultural and language heritage; secondly, enhanced learning of at every level institution.

At a larger scale, the language movements in Tripura and the rising consciousness for preserving the indigenous culture and heritage can be a view of the larger context of Northeastern regions recent political and social discourses. The attempts to decentralized northeast with its own heritage is a decisive perspective for critical analysis, while considering the issue of Kokborok in particular.

Reference

1. Anindita Ghoshal. *Changing Mentality of the Bengalee Refugees: The Story of Tripura (1946-1971)* | *Www.1947partitionarchive.Org*. <https://in.1947partitionarchive.org/node/1839>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.
2. Barman, Priyanka Deb. ‘Roman Script for Kokborok Language: Indigenous Tripura Students Body on Indefinite Strike’. *Hindustan Times*, 21 Mar. 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/roman-script-for-kokborok-language-indigenous-tripura-students-body-on-indefinite-strike-101742543366502.html>.
3. *Cultural Invisibility – India’s 600 Potentially Endangered Languages – Tribal Cultural Heritage in India*. <https://indiantribalheritage.org/?p=6039#gsc.tab=0>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.
4. Debbarma, Khakchang. *Transborder Migration a Study of Its Impact on Tripura Politics*. 1995. Shillong. *shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in*, <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/60670>.
5. Debbarma, Sudeshna, and Mousami Debbarma. ‘The Minority Languages of Tripura with Special Reference to Kokborok Language: A Study on the Language Demography of Tripura, India’. *Indian Journal of Language and Linguistics*, vol. 5, June 2024, pp. 53–68. *ResearchGate*, <https://doi.org/10.54392/ijll2425>.
6. Hoque, Faijul. ‘Kokborok: A Major Tribal Language of Tripura’. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 19, no. 10, 2014, pp. 30–35. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-191053035>.
7. Madhumita Barbora. ‘India’s Land of the Seven Sisters Is One of the Most Linguistically Diverse Regions in the World. Yet Many of Its Indigenous Languages Are at Risk.’ *The Languages of the Seven Sisters*, <https://www.acu.ac.uk/the-acu-review/the-languages-of-the-seven-sisters/>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.
8. *Tripura: Indigenous Tribe Demand for Roman Script for Kokborok* | *NewsX*. Directed by NewsX Live, 2025. *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNHneezor3o>.
9. TRIPURA, JABANIKA, and PADMINI TRIPURA. ‘An Overview On Kokborok Language Origin’. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS - IJCRT*, vol. 12, no. 3, Mar. 2024, <https://www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2403009.pdf>.
10. *TRIPURAINFOWAY: Tripura’s Latest News, Views & IT Portal*. <https://www.tripurainfoway.com/cms/census-2011/>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

11. *United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) / Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD)*. <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/indigenous-peoples/unpfii>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.
12. Van Schendel, Willem. 'Rebuffing Bengali Dominance: Postcolonial India and Bangladesh'. *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 1, Jan. 2023, pp. 105–35. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2022.2150870>.