

## The Future of Kokborok: Revitalization, Innovation, and Cultural Preservation

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### ABSTRACT

The Kokborok language, deeply intertwined with the cultural and social identity of the Borok people of Tripura, stands at a pivotal point in its evolution. As modernization and globalization reshape societal structures, the language faces significant challenges, including declining intergenerational transmission, competition from dominant regional and global languages, and ongoing script standardization debates. However, these challenges also present opportunities for revitalization and innovation. This exploration highlights strategies for preserving Kokborok through digital platforms, educational reforms, and community-driven initiatives. It emphasizes the importance of grassroots movements, storytelling traditions, and government collaborations in maintaining the language's relevance. Additionally, it examines how technologies such as mobile applications, artificial intelligence, and online learning tools can bridge gaps in language transmission and accessibility. Kokborok's journey reflects broader indigenous language movements worldwide, showcasing both shared struggles and unique approaches to cultural preservation. By aligning traditional practices with modern tools, Kokborok holds the potential to thrive in the future while retaining its cultural authenticity and significance. Many movements and thinkers have struggled to establish a written form of Kokborok, aiming to develop the language and literature while focusing on revitalization, innovation, and cultural

preservation. One of the earliest initiatives was the *Tripura Kokborok Unnayon Parishad*, established in 1967 by Advocate Birchandra Debbarma, Agore Debbarma, Mohon Choudhuri, Tripur Sen, and Rajkumari Kamal Prabha Debbarma, among others. Another notable movement, the *Tripura Kokborok Sahitya Sabha*, was founded in 1972 by Alindralal Tripura, who drew inspiration from the *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* in Assam and its literary activities. In January 1986, the *Kokborok Sahitya Sanskriti Sansad* (Association for Kokborok Literature and Cultural Movement) was initiated by leaders such as Dasharath Deb, Sudwana Debbarma, Mahendra Debbarma, and Shyamlal Debbarma. Other significant organizations include the *Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission*, led by Binoy Debbarma and others, and the *Kokborok PhuarnaiBodol* (a society focused on developing the language of the indigenous Borok people). Key figures in the latter include Dr. Pritilata Debbarma, Rajlaxmi Chakma, Barna Rani Jematia, Mani Debbarma, Runu Debbarma, and Jamuna Debbarma, who have contributed immensely to the development and preservation of Kokborok.

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## 1. Introduction

Kokborok, the language of the Borok people of Tripura, carries centuries of cultural heritage, oral traditions, and community identity. As the linguistic backbone of a matrilineal society, Kokborok has long served as a vessel for passing down values, traditions, folklore, proverbs, folktales, and stories that define the Borok people's worldview. Over time, it has evolved to encompass modern genres such as novels (*Kothomayung*), novellas (*Kothomayungste*), poetry (*Koklop*), and epics (*Koklopyung*), reflecting the language's ability to adapt while retaining its cultural essence.

However, like many indigenous languages, Kokborok faces significant challenges in the modern era. These include diminishing usage among younger generations, who are increasingly adopting dominant global languages such as English, Bengali, and Hindi for education, technology, and governance. This shift threatens the intergenerational transmission of Kokborok, posing a risk to the preservation of its linguistic and cultural heritage.

Despite these challenges, Kokborok continues to adapt and evolve, reflecting the resilience of the Borok people. The language's journey mirrors the broader struggles of indigenous communities worldwide, particularly as they navigate intermingling with dominant languages such as Bengali, Hindi, and English to balance tradition with modernization. In recent years, concerted efforts have emerged to preserve and revitalize Kokborok, driven by cultural organizations, governmental policies, and digital innovations. From educational reforms that integrate Kokborok into school curricula to mobile apps and online platforms that make learning the language accessible, these initiatives aim to ensure Kokborok's survival in a rapidly changing world.

As Kokborok navigates this crossroads, its future depends on the collaboration of stakeholders at all levels—government, community, and global networks. This exploration focuses on the opportunities for revitalization, the innovations re-shaping how Kokborok is learned and shared, and the cultural significance of sustaining a language that is central to the Borok identity.

## **2. Challenges in Kokborok Language Revitalization**

### **2.1 Addressing Kokborok Intergenerational Gaps in Language Transmission**

One of the primary challenges facing Kokborok is the declining use of the language among younger generations. As families move to urban areas in search of better educational and economic opportunities, children are increasingly exposed to dominant languages such as Bengali, Hindi, and English. This shift often results in Kokborok being spoken less frequently at home, reducing the opportunity for children to learn the language organically through daily interactions with elders.

Given that Kokborok has only recently been introduced as an academic discipline in colleges and universities, it is crucial to appoint experienced individuals as regular faculty members. These initiators, who have long taught and promoted Kokborok, possess a deeper understanding of the original Kokborok vocabulary, ornamented expressions, traditions, culture, folktales, and folklore. Their expertise is invaluable for preserving the authenticity of the language and ensuring its transmission to future generations, particularly in academic settings where the younger generation is still developing proficiency in Kokborok.

Efforts to address this gap require a multifaceted approach, including the introduction of Kokborok in schools, encouraging parents to use the language at home, and organizing community events that foster

intergenerational communication. Storytelling festivals, language workshops, and interactive cultural programs can play a crucial role in bridging this gap by making language learning enjoyable and relevant for younger audiences.

## 2.2 Overcoming the Dominance of Regional and Global Languages

The dominance of regional and global languages presents another significant challenge. Bengali, Hindi, and English, in particular, are often prioritized due to their perceived economic, social, and academic advantages, leaving Kokborok marginalized in public and formal spaces. This imbalance is further exacerbated by the limited availability of Kokborok-language media and resources, making it difficult for the language to compete with more widely spoken languages.

To address this, efforts should focus on increasing the visibility and practical use of Kokborok in everyday life. This includes expanding its presence in media, governance, and business sectors, and creating incentives for schools, colleges, universities, and institutions to actively promote Kokborok. Policies that emphasize bilingual education models—where Kokborok is taught alongside Bengali, Hindi, or English—could offer a balanced approach to language preservation and modernization. Such initiatives would ensure that Kokborok remains a vibrant and integral part of Tripura's linguistic and cultural landscape while adapting to the demands of a globalized world.

## 2.3 Dealing with Script Controversies and Standardization Issues

The lack of consensus over the appropriate script for writing Kokborok has long been a point of contention. The Roman, Bengali, and Devanagari scripts are all used in different contexts, leading to inconsistencies in written materials and teaching resources. This ongoing debate has hindered the development of standardized textbooks and other educational tools, complicating efforts to promote literacy in Kokborok.

Kokborok, or Tipra language, has its own script known as *Koloma*. Evidence of this script can be found in the historical chronicle *Rajmala*. The antiquity of the Kokborok language is documented in the *Rajmala*, which recounts the history of the Manikya Dynasty. Originally written in Tipra (Kokborok) during the reign of Dharma Manikya, the language was passed down orally for generations before the written form emerged. However, by the 14th century AD, the chronicles were translated or rewritten in Bengali. The following excerpt from *Rajmala* illustrates this transition:

*"PurbeRajmalachhiloTroipurBhaste,  
PrayarGathilo sob sokolebujite,  
Su-bhashateDharmarajeRajmalakoilo,  
Rajmalaboliyaluketehoilo."*

(Source: *Rajmala*, Part 2, Dharma Manikya Chapter, Page 6)

The *Koloma* script is believed to have been used for writing Tipra during this period. However, political turmoil in the 14th century AD led to the decline of the script, with much of the historical Tipra language material being burned or buried. Revitalizing the *Koloma* script would require significant effort, as it would entail reconstructing over 1,000 years of linguistic development.

Given these challenges, most Borok people have opted for the Roman script for Kokborok. The Roman script is considered more accessible for educational purposes and has gained acceptance due to its global reach. As Kokborok has only recently been introduced into academic curricula, the adoption of the Roman script has facilitated its dissemination, ensuring its relevance in the modern era.

A unified approach to script standardization is essential for the effective promotion of the language. Open dialogues among linguistic experts, educators, and community leaders are necessary to reach a consensus that respects cultural sensitivities while ensuring practicality. Establishing a standardized script would facilitate the production of high-quality educational materials, literary works, and digital resources, making the language more accessible to a broader audience.

### **3. Innovations and Modern Tools for Language Preservation**

#### **3.1 Role of Digital Media and Mobile Apps in Promoting Kokborok**

Digital platforms have emerged as vital tools for preserving and promoting Kokborok. Mobile applications designed to teach Kokborok, such as interactive vocabulary builders, grammar guides, and pronunciation tools, make the language more accessible to younger and non-Kokborok-speaking, tech-savvy generations. These apps often incorporate gamified learning methods that encourage consistent engagement while catering to learners at various proficiency levels.

Social media platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram provide spaces for sharing Kokborok content, including folk songs, storytelling, drama, and language tutorials. Online groups and pages dedicated to Kokborok culture and language have created virtual communities where native

speakers and learners can exchange ideas and knowledge. These platforms not only preserve the language but also introduce it to global audiences, ensuring its visibility beyond traditional geographical boundaries.

### **3.2 Educational Reforms and Incorporation of Kokborok into Mainstream Curricula**

Efforts to integrate Kokborok into educational curricula have played a crucial role in its preservation. The introduction of Kokborok as a subject in primary and secondary schools has ensured that children are exposed to the language from an early age. Higher education institutions, such as Tripura University, now offer certificate courses, diploma programs in Kokborok, undergraduate programs, and even postgraduate degrees, cementing its place as an academic discipline. Under Maharaja Bir Bikram University (a state university), institutions like MBB College and BBM College reformed their Kokborok curricula in 2015 to align with the Choice-Based Credit System (CBCS). This model integrates Kokborok alongside mainstream academic disciplines, setting a precedent that is now followed by other universities.

Further reforms could involve creating bilingual education models where Kokborok is taught alongside Bengali, Hindi, or English. Such models would help students appreciate the value of their native language while acquiring practical linguistic skills. Developing high-quality, standardized textbooks and digital resources for both students and educators is essential for sustaining these efforts and ensuring that Kokborok continues to thrive as a modern academic discipline.

## **4. Community-Driven Initiatives**

### **4.1 The Role of Local Organizations in Revitalizing Kokborok**

Grassroots organizations and cultural groups have been at the forefront of efforts to revitalize Kokborok. These initiatives often focus on fostering community engagement through storytelling festivals, cultural workshops, and language classes aimed at both native speakers and learners. By emphasizing the cultural significance of Kokborok, these organizations instill pride and a sense of responsibility among community members to preserve their linguistic heritage.

Efforts to develop the Kokborok language and literature have been ongoing since 1967 AD, aiming for revitalization, innovation, and cultural preservation. A significant milestone was the establishment of the *Tripura Kokborok Unnayon Parishad* (Council of Kokborok Development of Tripura) in 1967 by

leaders like Advocate Birchandra Debbarma, Agore Debbarma, Mohon Choudhuri, Tripur Sen, and Rajkumari Kamal Prabha Debbarma. Another noteworthy initiative was the formation of the *Tripura Kokborok Sahitya Sabha* in 1972, led by Alindralal Tripura, who drew inspiration from the *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* of Assam, recognizing the cultural and linguistic similarities between the Borok and Bodo people.

In January 1986, the *Kokborok Sahitya Sanskriti Sansad* (Association of Kokborok Literature and Cultural Movement) was established by figures such as Dasharath Deb, Sudwana Debbarma, Mahendra Debbarma, and Shyamlal Debbarma. This movement, often referred to as the "Kokborok Literature and Cultural Renaissance," played a pivotal role in publishing the magazine *Kotal Kothoma*, which became a bridge for modern Kokborok writers. In 1987, three significant Kokborok literary works were published in this magazine: the first novel in Kokborok, *HachukKhurio (In the Lap of the Mountain)* by Sudwana Debbarma; the short story *Adong (Representative)* by Shyamlal Debbarma; and *HapingGairingoChibuksa Ringo (The Calling of the Serpent in the Deserted Tongghar of Huk)* by Chandra Kanta Murasing.

Earlier efforts included the compilation of *Koktun*, a literary newspaper, by Ajay Debbarma and Surya Reang in 1961 AD, and the publication of *Chini Kok (Our Language)* by Mrinal Debbarma in 1972-1973 AD. Other notable publications include *Sachlang* by the Tribal Student's Federation (TSF), *Tripura Star*, *Karam* by Bijay Kumar Hrangkhal, *Hojlai (Flame of Fire)* by Deb Brata Kalai, *Aituruma (Morning Star)* by Shyamlal Debbarma, and *Chini Ha (Our Soil)* by Braja Bihari Roy. These publications contributed significantly to the revitalization of Kokborok.

Additionally, organizations like the *Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission*, led by Binoy Debbarma, have made substantial contributions by publishing Kokborok books and developing the language's grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation standards. Another key initiative, *Kokborok PhuarnaiBodol* (A Society for the Development of the Indigenous Language of Tripura), was founded in 2014 by Dr. Pritilata Debbarma, Rajlaxmi Chakma, Barna Rani Jematia, Mani Debbarma, Runu Debbarma, Jamuna Debbarma, and others. Their efforts include pressuring the government to introduce Kokborok in schools, colleges, universities, and other institutions.

Local cultural centers also host events where elders share folktales, songs, and oral histories, ensuring the transmission of knowledge to younger generations. This intergenerational exchange strengthens linguistic skills while reinforcing community ties and cultural identity.

#### **4.2 Storytelling, Cultural Events, and Grassroots Efforts in Kokborok**

Storytelling remains a powerful tool for language preservation, seamlessly combining entertainment with education. Many Kokborok folktales and myths are passed down through oral narratives, preserving not only the language but also the values and historical memories embedded within these stories. These narratives carry the ancestral history of the Borok people of Tripura, ensuring that cultural knowledge is passed down through generations.

Cultural events such as *Garia Puja*, *Ker*, *Kharchi*, *Lampra*, and *Mamita* provide vibrant platforms for showcasing traditional stories and performances, drawing attention to the richness of Kokborok's heritage. These festivals celebrate the language and culture, making them central to the preservation and promotion of Kokborok.

Grassroots efforts often extend beyond storytelling, encompassing initiatives such as language competitions, theater productions in Kokborok, and community radio programs. These activities actively engage people of all ages, turning Kokborok into a living and evolving part of daily life. By blending traditional practices with modern approaches, these initiatives ensure that Kokborok remains relevant and dynamic in a rapidly changing world.

#### **4.3 Collaboration between Government and Community Stakeholders**

Collaborative efforts between governmental bodies and community stakeholders have proven essential for the long-term success of language preservation initiatives. Government support, such as funding language programs and incorporating Kokborok into educational policies, lays the groundwork for sustainable development. Meanwhile, community organizations provide local expertise, cultural knowledge, and grassroots engagement, ensuring that these initiatives are both relevant and impactful.

To ensure genuine progress, the government must uphold ethical and neutral practices, particularly in the appointment of faculty members and other stakeholders involved in Kokborok's development. It is imperative to prioritize merit and integrity over corruption or bias, as such practices are essential for the spontaneous and authentic growth of the Kokborok language.



Examples of successful collaborations include the establishment of Kokborok language academies and the development of digital archives documenting traditional knowledge. These joint efforts not only preserve cultural heritage but also ensure that resources are readily available for future generations. By combining the infrastructure and reach of government initiatives with the passion and commitment of local communities, these partnerships create a strong foundation for the sustained preservation and promotion of Kokborok.

## **5. The Global Stage: Kokborok and Indigenous Language Movements**

### **5.1 Comparing Kokborok with Successful Indigenous Language Revitalization Efforts Worldwide**

Kokborok's revitalization efforts resonate with those of other indigenous languages globally, many of which face similar challenges related to language loss, globalization, and urbanization. The revitalization of languages like Māori in New Zealand and Native American languages in the United States offers valuable lessons for Kokborok. These languages have been preserved through a combination of government support, community initiatives, and the integration of the language into modern educational and digital spaces.

For instance, Hebrew was successfully revived as a spoken language two millennia after it ceased to be spoken conversationally, although it was continuously used in written and liturgical contexts. This "success story" highlights the potential for a language to regain prominence through determined efforts. Similarly, the Māori Language Commission in New Zealand has worked effectively to integrate the Māori language into primary school curricula, develop Māori-language media, and produce educational resources for learners. In the United States, many Native American tribes have employed immersive programs, language camps, and technology to teach and preserve their languages, combating decline while inspiring global recognition of indigenous cultures.

Kokborok can draw valuable insights from these international models, particularly by expanding its presence in education, media, and digital platforms. The experience of other indigenous languages underscores the importance of collaboration among governments, cultural organizations, and communities in successful language revitalization efforts. By adopting similar strategies, Kokborok has the potential to preserve its linguistic heritage while thriving in the modern era.

## 5.2 Opportunities for International Recognition and Collaboration

As indigenous languages gain international recognition, Kokborok too can benefit from this broader movement. UNESCO's efforts to protect endangered languages, for example, have created a framework for collaboration that could assist in the revitalization of Kokborok. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples also highlights the right of indigenous communities to preserve their languages, and this can serve as a strong foundation for lobbying for support for Kokborok on the global stage.

Collaborating with international organizations focused on language preservation, such as Safety Integrity Level(SIL) International and the Endangered Languages Project, can provide Kokborok with access to resources, expertise, and networks that are invaluable in the revitalization process. Partnerships with global organizations can also help promote Kokborok at international cultural events, raising awareness about the language and its cultural significance.

Additionally, Kokborok's inclusion in global digital platforms could further boost its recognition and use. The language's presence on major online platforms, as well as its representation in international linguistic research, can contribute to its broader acceptance as a valuable cultural and linguistic asset.

## 6. Conclusion

Kokborok, as a cornerstone of the Borok people's cultural identity, has managed to navigate the challenges posed by globalization, urbanization, and linguistic shifts. Despite the pressures from dominant languages and changing societal structures, Kokborok remains a vital part of the community's heritage. Through ongoing efforts to integrate the language into education, media, and digital platforms, the Borok people have shown a strong commitment to revitalizing Kokborok for future generations.

The language's survival depends on a continued balance between tradition and innovation. The development of digital tools, the use of mobile applications, and the creation of Kokborok content for social media platforms represent exciting opportunities for language preservation. Simultaneously, Kokborok's inclusion in the educational system, particularly through bilingual education models and higher education courses, is essential for ensuring that younger generations acquire the language and understand its cultural significance.

International collaboration and learning from successful indigenous language movements globally provide further opportunities for Kokborok. The experiences of languages like Māori and Native American languages highlight the importance of community engagement, government support, and technological innovation in ensuring that Kokborok thrives in the modern era. By leveraging these strategies, Kokborok can continue to serve as a symbol of cultural pride, resilience, and unity for the Borok people.

Ultimately, the future of Kokborok hinges on continued efforts from all stakeholders—government bodies, cultural organizations, community leaders, and the youth. With concerted action and support, Kokborok can not only survive but thrive, remaining a living, evolving language that continues to connect the Borok people to their heritage while adapting to the demands of a globalized world.

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