The Role of Kokborok in Contemporary Tribal Governance and Policy-Making

Dr. Pritilata Debbarma[1]*, **Nelson Debbarma[2]**

[1]Ex-Guest Faculty, Department of Kokborok, Tripura University, Tripura, India.

[2]Member, Kokborok Translation Team, Tripura University, Tripura, India.

*Email: pritilatadebbarma@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper **Article History** 	The integration of Kokborok into tribal governance and policy-making marks a significant milestone in the empowerment of Tripura's indigenous communities. As the mother tongue of the Borok people, Kokborok plays a pivotal role in fostering linguistic and literature inclusivity and cultural preservation within the administrative and governance framework. This volume explores the historical journey of Kokborok in governance, its adoption in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), and its impact on local policy-making. It delves into the successes and challenges of using Kokborok in decentralized governance, highlights its contribution to empowering indigenous communities, and examines its role in promoting self-determination. Additionally, this study discusses the synergy between education and governance, identifying how the integration of Kokborok into educational curricula has enhanced its utility in administrative roles. The volume concludes with a vision for the future of Kokborok in self governance, proposing strategies to overcome barriers and strengthen its presence in policy-making for the development of Borok peoples. By aligning traditional linguistic heritage with contemporary governance, Kokborok not only preserves the cultural identity of Tripura's indigenous people but also serves as a tool for inclusive and effective development of self administration.

1. Introduction

1.1   Overview of Tribal Governance in Tripura

Tribal self-governance in Tripura has evolved in response to the cultural, linguistic, literary, and social needs of the indigenous Borok people. The establishment of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) in 1985 marked a significant step in empowering the indigenous population by granting them autonomy over their administrative and cultural affairs. Self-governance in tribal areas is deeply intertwined with local language, traditions, and practices, making Kokborok a central element in governance and policy implementation for the Borok people. Kokborok folklore, folktales, proverbs, folk songs, lullabies, and lamentations have played a crucial role in shaping the identity and governance structures of the Borok community in Tripura.

1.2   Historical Context of Kokborok in Administration

Kokborok, the native language of Tripura's indigenous communities, has long served as a symbol of identity and cultural preservation. As a language derived from the Sino-Tibetan language family, specifically the Bodo-Naga branch, Kokborok shares linguistic and cultural ties with several other Bodo languages. From the Bodo branch, ten sub-groups have emerged: 1. Bodo, 2. Dimasa, 3. Garo, 4. Rabha, 5. Hajong, 6. Mech, 7. Lalung, 8. Tipra, 9. Chutiya, and 10. Moran. Among these, all except the Tipra primarily inhabit Assam, sharing similar linguistic structures, speaking styles, traditional attire, food habits, and root words.

The Tipra people, who reside in present-day Tripura, are the namesake of the state itself. The term "Tripura" is believed to have originated from "Tipra," which is a blend of two words: "Twi" (meaning water) and "Bupra" (meaning branch), referring to the tribes that historically settled along the Barak River. Over time, "Twi + Bupra" evolved into "Tipra," with phonetic blending causing the shift in pronunciation.

The Tipra community further branched into several sub-groups, including 1. Old Tripuri, 2. Reang, 3. Jamatia, 4. Noatia, 5. Murasing, 6. Uchoi, 7. Kalai, and 8. Rupini. Historically, all these groups were part of the same Tipra community, speaking the Kokborok (or Tipra) language. However, with time, political and social factors led to distinctions among these sub-groups, causing minor variations in dialect and pronunciation patterns, particularly in tone and rhythm.

Despite its deep historical roots, Kokborok's formal inclusion in governance and policy-making only began in the late 20th century, with the establishment of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) in 1985. The incorporation of Kokborok into administrative and governmental processes was a significant milestone, addressing linguistic barriers and ensuring greater representation for indigenous communities in decision-making bodies. This move not only facilitated effective governance but also reinforced the linguistic and cultural identity of the Borok people, ensuring that their language remained a vital aspect of Tripura's political and social framework.

1.3 Objectives of Integrating Kokborok into self Governance

The integration of Kokborok into self governance aims to achieve several objectives, including:

- Enhancing linguistic accessibility for the indigenous population in administrative affairs

- Promoting cultural preservation through the use of Kokborok in self governance

- Empowering indigenous communities by ensuring their active participation in policy-making for future generation.

- Creating a model for inclusive and participatory self governance that aligns with the cultural heritage of Tripura for Borok peoples.

2. Kokborok and Decentralized Governance

2.1 Role of Kokborok in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC)

The TTAADC was established under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, granting autonomy to Tripura's tribal communities in managing their local self governance. Kokborok, as the primary language of the Borok people, has played an essential role in decentralizing governance within the council. Its use in official communications, legislative discussions, and local administration ensures that governance is accessible to the indigenous population. By incorporating Kokborok language, the TTAADC has bridged the gap between the administrative framework and the cultural identity of Tripura's tribal communities.

2.2 Linguistic Accessibility and Administrative Inclusivity

Using Kokborok in governance has significantly improved linguistic accessibility for the indigenous

population. It enables community members to engage more effectively with administrative processes, fostering inclusivity in policy-making for development of indigenous people. Public services such as health, education, and welfare programs are now more approachable, as they are delivered in the native language. This linguistic inclusivity has also encouraged more tribal youth to participate in governance by pursuing administrative roles where Kokborok proficiency is valued.

2.3   **Challenges in Implementing Kokborok in Decentralized Governance**
Despite its inclusion in governance, the use of Kokborok in self-governance faces several challenges. One of the primary obstacles is the lack of a standardized administrative vocabulary, which has hindered its full implementation in official documentation and government communications. Without a unified lexicon for legal and bureaucratic terms, many administrative processes continue to rely on Bengali or English, limiting the practical use of Kokborok in governance.

Additionally, resource constraints pose significant hurdles. The shortage of Kokborok-trained personnel, a lack of comprehensive teaching materials, and inadequate institutional support have slowed the language's integration into governance and education. Furthermore, resistance from non-tribal populations within the state has complicated efforts to establish Kokborok as a primary administrative language, as some groups view its promotion as a challenge to linguistic and political balance within Tripura.

Proposed Solutions

To address these challenges, a collaborative effort between the government, educational institutions, and linguistic experts is essential. Key measures include:

- Developing standardized Kokborok teaching materials, including textbooks, administrative glossaries, and translated legal documents.

- Expanding teacher training programs to ensure more qualified instructors can teach Kokborok at all educational levels.

- Appointing more expert Kokborok educators and language specialists in schools, colleges, and government institutions.

- Establishing Kokborok language research centers dedicated to linguistic development, terminology creation, and preservation efforts.

- Investing in digital resources, such as online learning platforms, translation tools, and mobile applications, to make Kokborok more accessible for official use and daily communication.

The role of Kokborok in decentralized governance is crucial in preserving cultural identity while also addressing the practical needs of indigenous communities. Overcoming these challenges will require coordinated efforts from the government, cultural organizations, and academic institutions to ensure Kokborok is effectively integrated into governance, education, and everyday administrative functions.

3. Policy-Making and Indigenous Empowerment

3.1 **Policies Promoting Kokborok in Public Administration**
Since its recognition as an official language of Tripura in 1979, Kokborok has gradually been integrated into various facets of public administration and governance. Policies such as the inclusion of Kokborok in educational curricula, the use of Kokborok in government documentation within the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) and State Government initiatives to promote Kokborok in cultural and administrative functions have been instrumental. These measures aim to address historical marginalization by making governance more inclusive and reflective of the indigenous population's cultural identity.

3.2 **Role of Kokborok in Local Governance and Self-Determination**
The use of Kokborok in local governance is a powerful tool for self-determination among the Borok people. By conducting legislative proceedings, public meetings, and policy making communications in Kokborok, local leaders ensure that self governance remains accessible to the community. This inclusivity strengthens community participation in decision-making processes, promoting empowerment at the grassroots level. Moreover, Kokborok's integration into local governance highlights its role as a unifying force among various tribal groups in Tripura, fostering a shared cultural identity.

3.3 **Success Stories of Policy Implementation**
Several success stories demonstrate the effectiveness of using Kokborok in self governance and policy-making. For example:

- **Educational Policies**: The inclusion of Kokborok as a subject in schools and higher education institutions has enabled tribal students to learn their language academically, enhancing their participation in governance roles.

- **Administrative Use**: Within the TTAADC, and State Government official communications and public notices in Kokborok have made governance more transparent and accessible.

- **Cultural Revitalization Programs**: Policies promoting Kokborok cultural events, such as the celebration of Garia Puja, Boisu and Mamita festivals, Hojagri, Hangrai and Ker puja etc. have ensured that indigenous traditions remain an integral part of Tripura's socio-political fabric.

The success of these policies underscores the importance of Kokborok as a medium for empowerment and as a means of connecting governance with cultural identity of Borok peoples. Strengthening these initiatives further can ensure a sustainable and inclusive model of tribal self governance.

4. Education and Governance Synergy

4.1 **Integration of Kokborok into Formal Education and Its Impact on self Governance**
The integration of Kokborok into formal education has played a pivotal role in empowering indigenous communities and strengthening governance frameworks. Since the introduction of Kokborok as a subject in schools and higher education institutions, students have gained the opportunity to connect with their cultural roots while acquiring literature and linguistic proficiency. This educational foundation has not only enhanced cultural awareness but also prepared students to actively participate in self governance, especially in roles within the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) and State Government.

4.2 **Capacity-Building Through Kokborok Education for Administrative Roles**
Kokborok education has contributed to capacity-building by preparing individuals to engage in administrative and self governance roles. Training programs, certificate courses, PG Diploma and postgraduate degrees in Kokborok have enabled students to develop the necessary skills for public administration. These programs focus on developing proficiency in Kokborok for effective communication, drafting official documents, and conducting public meetings in the indigenous language. This capacity-building ensures that governance remains inclusive and representative of the indigenous population.

4.3 **Opportunities for Skill Development in Kokborok Self Governance**
Education in Kokborok also open doors for skill development that directly benefits Self governance. Programs that focus on linguistics, translation, and cultural studies equip students with tools to bridge the gap between tribal governance and broader administrative systems. Furthermore, specialized training

in public policy and self governance conducted in Kokborok has the potential to produce a new generation of leaders who are deeply rooted in the cultural, literature and linguistic ethos of the Borok people.

The synergy between education and governance highlights the critical role of Kokborok in creating an inclusive administrative framework that respects the cultural heritage of Tripura's indigenous communities.

5. Challenges and Solutions in Policy Implementation

5.1   Limited   Resources   and   Infrastructure

One of the primary challenges in implementing Kokborok in self-governance and policy-making is the lack of resources and infrastructure. There is a shortage of standardized textbooks, expert faculties, translation resources, administrative glossaries, and training materials, making its application in official settings inconsistent. Additionally, many schools, colleges, and universities, particularly in rural areas, lack the necessary infrastructure and funding to effectively teach Kokborok. This, in turn, limits the pool of qualified individuals who can contribute to self-governance and administrative functions using the language.

Proposed Solution

To address this gap, the government and educational institutions must collaborate to:

- Develop and distribute standardized Kokborok teaching materials, including textbooks, reference guides, and official administrative glossaries.

- Expand translation initiatives to ensure legal, policy, and governance-related documents are accessible in Kokborok.

- Appoint expert faculties across educational institutions to strengthen language instruction and professional training.

- Establish Kokborok language research centers focused on linguistic development, policy terminology, and academic resources.

- Invest in digital resources, such as e-learning platforms, mobile applications, and online dictionaries, to enhance accessibility and engagement.

- Strengthen teacher training programs to equip educators with the skills necessary to teach Kokborok effectively in both academic and administrative settings.

By implementing these measures, Kokborok's role in governance can be strengthened, ensuring its practical integration into policy-making, education, and everyday administration while preserving the linguistic and cultural identity of the Borok people.

5.2   **Political   and   Social   Resistance**

Another significant challenge in integrating Kokborok into governance is the political and social resistance to its inclusion. In a linguistically diverse state like Tripura, the promotion of one language can sometimes be perceived as marginalizing others, leading to tensions between different communities. Additionally, resistance from non-tribal populations, who may not understand Kokborok, can hinder its widespread acceptance in administrative and governance functions. Concerns over linguistic dominance and accessibility have slowed efforts to make Kokborok a primary medium in governance.

Proposed Solution

To address these concerns, a balanced bilingual or multilingual policy should be implemented, ensuring that Kokborok is used alongside Bengali, Hindi, or English in governance and administration. Key measures include:

- Implementing bilingual policies where official documents, signages, and administrative communication include Kokborok alongside other widely spoken languages.

- Conducting awareness campaigns to educate both tribal and non-tribal communities about the historical and cultural significance of Kokborok.

- Encouraging multilingual education to promote linguistic inclusivity while preserving Kokborok.

- Establishing clear policies making Kokborok compulsory in educational institutions, ensuring future generations are proficient in the language.

- Promoting cultural exchange programs to bridge the linguistic gap and foster inter-community understanding.

By adopting a multilingual approach, ensuring equal representation of languages, and implementing inclusive policies, Kokborok's role in governance can be expanded without alienating other linguistic

groups. This approach will strengthen unity, promote cultural diversity, and ensure the effective integration of Kokborok into the administrative framework of Tripura.

5.3   **Lack   of   Trained   Personnel**

A significant barrier to the implementation of Kokborok in governance is the lack of adequately trained personnel who are proficient in both Kokborok and administrative procedures. This shortage limits the language's use in official communications, policy-making, and decision-making processes. Without a skilled workforce that is fluent in Kokborok and familiar with governance structures, the language's integration into administration remains incomplete.

Proposed Solution

To bridge this gap, targeted capacity-building programs should be introduced to train Kokborok-speaking professionals for administrative roles. Key measures include:

- Establishing scholarships and fellowships for Kokborok-speaking students who wish to pursue careers in governance, administration, and public policy.

- Organizing workshops and refresher courses for existing government officials to improve their proficiency in Kokborok and enhance its practical use in governance.

- Introducing Kokborok as a compulsory subject in DIET (District Institute of Education and Training) and B.Ed. colleges to prepare future educators who can teach Kokborok effectively.

- Appointing more expert Kokborok faculties in schools, colleges, and universities to strengthen language education and increase the number of qualified professionals.

- Developing specialized training programs in law, administration, and policy drafting in Kokborok, ensuring that governance-related vocabulary and procedures are well understood.

By investing in education, training, and professional development, Kokborok can be effectively integrated into governance, ensuring linguistic inclusivity while preserving the cultural identity of the Borok people. These focused policies and collaborative efforts will strengthen self-governance and promote a more inclusive and representative administration in Tripura.

6. The Future of Kokborok in Governance

6.1 Digital Tools for Kokborok Administration

The integration of digital tools into governance presents a significant opportunity for the widespread use of Kokborok in administrative systems. Mobile applications, translation software, and online platforms tailored for Kokborok can enhance communication and efficiency in governance.

For example, digital archives, government portals, and e-governance systems could incorporate Kokborok, enabling indigenous communities to access public services in their native language. Such technological advancements can make governance more inclusive and accessible, bridging the digital divide for Kokborok speakers.

In the future, Kokborok should be widely incorporated into digital tools, ensuring its global presence and facilitating its use in governmental, educational, and social sectors worldwide.

6.2 Vision for Kokborok in Tripura's Governance by 2030

By 2030, the vision for Kokborok in governance should include its complete integration into local and state-level administrative systems. This includes:

- Recognizing Kokborok as an official medium of communication in all TTAADC offices and state government offices.

- Publishing government documents and reports in Kokborok to enhance accessibility.

- Using Kokborok in judicial processes within tribal and general administrative areas.

- Expanding Kokborok's role in cultural diplomacy and ensuring its representation at national and international platforms.

The integration of Kokborok into policy-making, governance, and administration will strengthen the identity of the Borok people and contribute to a more inclusive governance system in Tripura.

6.3 Building a Framework for National and Global Recognition of Kokborok

The future of Kokborok lies in its recognition beyond Tripura, gaining prominence at national and international levels. Establishing frameworks for its inclusion in global linguistic, literary, and cultural platforms can ensure its sustainability and growth.

Key initiatives include:

- Cultural exchange programs to promote Kokborok literature and traditions.

- Academic collaborations with national and international universities to enhance research on Kokborok.

- Participation in global forums on indigenous languages to secure international recognition.

- Partnerships with organizations like UNESCO to obtain funding and technical support for language preservation initiatives.

For example, prominent Kokborok poet Chandra Kanta Murasing has represented Kokborok literature at various national and international writer's conferences, including:

- Bangladesh Jatiyo Kabita Utsab (1999)

- Calcutta University, Presidency University, Banaras Hindu University, and North-Eastern Hill University (Shillong)

- Melbourne, Australia – All Writers' Meet (April 1–2, 2016), organized by Monash University

7. Conclusion

The integration of Kokborok into self-governance and policy-making represents a transformative approach to empowering Tripura's indigenous communities. As the cultural, literary, and linguistic backbone of the Borok people, Kokborok serves not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of identity and unity. Through its inclusion in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) and its increasing role in state governance, Kokborok has played a crucial role in bridging administrative processes with the cultural heritage of the indigenous population.

However, several challenges hinder its full potential in governance, including limited resources, political resistance, and a shortage of trained personnel. Addressing these obstacles through the development of educational tools, capacity-building programs, and quality teacher recruitment, along with digital integration, is essential for creating a sustainable framework for Kokborok in public administration.

Looking ahead, the future of Kokborok in governance lies in:

- Leveraging technological advancements to make the language more accessible in official use.

- Promoting bilingual policies to ensure inclusivity in a multilingual state.

- Fostering national and global recognition through cultural diplomacy and linguistic advocacy.

By aligning traditional linguistic heritage with modern governance practices, Kokborok can continue to preserve the cultural identity of the Borok people while fostering inclusivity and accessibility in governance.

The journey of Kokborok in governance is a testament to the resilience of the Borok community and their commitment to preserving their heritage. With strategic efforts, collaborative policies, and the active participation of indigenous communities, Kokborok can become a model for inclusive governance, celebrating diversity while strengthening cultural and linguistic roots.

References

1. Debnath, R. (2014). *Kokborok - Language Origin & Development*. Language Wing, Education Department of TTAADC.

2. Junduchowdhury, K. (1999). *Kokborok Bhasha O Sahitya* (1st ed.). Akshar Publication & Caxton Printers.

3. Debbarma, N. C. (2010). *Kokborok Bhasha–Sahityer Kramabikash*. Naba Chandana Publication.

4. Debbarma, P. (2022). *Kokborok Kokno Kuchuk Beremo Tisathani Samung-Humung*. Kokborok Department, TTAADC, Khumulung, Tripura, India.

5. Jacquesson, F. (2008). *A Kokborok Grammar*. Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission.

6. Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC). (n.d.). *Efforts in Promoting Kokborok in Governance*. Retrieved from https://ttaadc.gov.in

7. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2021). *Language Revitalization: A Global Initiative*. Retrieved from https://www.unesco.org/en/languages

8. Kokborok and Language Politics in Tripura. (n.d.). *International Journal of Applied Research*. Retrieved from https://www.allresearchjournal.com

9. Global Language Movement. (2022). *Success Stories in Language Revitalization: A Look at Māori and Other Indigenous Languages*. Retrieved from https://www.language-movement.org

10. Language, Culture, and Identity: Global and Local Perspectives on Indigenous Languages. (2020). *International Journal of Indigenous Languages and Linguistics*. Retrieved from https://www.ijill.org

11. Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). *Kokborok*. Retrieved October 28, 2024, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kokborok