
The Influence of Kokborok on Multilingualism and Cultural Exchange in Northeast India

Dr. Pritilata Debbarma^{1*}, Nelson Debbarma²

^{1*}Ex – Guest Faculty, Department of Kokborok, Tripura University, Tripura, India, 799022,

²Member, Kokborok Translation Team, Tripura University, Tripura, India, 799022

prtilatadebbarma@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Kokborok, the native language of the Borok people in Tripura, has played a pivotal role in shaping the region's multilingual and cultural landscape. As a member of the Tibeto-Burman language family, Kokborok has historically interacted with neighbouring languages, including Bengali, Hindi, Assamese, Meitei (Manipuri), and other tribal languages. These interactions have resulted in lexical borrowings, phonetic adaptations, and structural influences, contributing to the language's dynamic evolution. This volume explores the multilingual nature of Tripura, where Kokborok coexists alongside Indo-Aryan and other Tibeto-Burman languages. It examines the historical, social, and political factors that have influenced language use, code-switching, and linguistic borrowing. Additionally, the study investigates the role of Kokborok in cultural exchange, particularly in music, literature, oral traditions, and festivals that foster inter-community connections. As urbanization and globalization reshape linguistic preferences, Kokborok faces both opportunities and challenges in maintaining its relevance. This volume discusses the impact of bilingualism, educational policies, and digital advancements on Kokborok, as well as its potential role in cross-cultural communication within and beyond Tripura. Understanding these linguistic interactions provides insights into the broader socio-political

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1, Introduction

The linguistic landscape of Northeast India is one of the most diverse in the world, with hundreds of languages and dialects coexisting within a relatively small geographical region. Among these, Kokborok holds a significant position as the native language of the Borok people in Tripura. As a Tibeto-Burman language, Kokborok has long interacted with Indo-Aryan and other indigenous languages, shaping its vocabulary, phonetics, and syntactic structures.

Multilingualism is a defining feature of Tripura, where Bengali, Hindi, Assamese, Meitei (Manipuri), and other tribal languages are spoken alongside Kokborok. Due to historical migration, trade, intermarriage, and political changes, linguistic contact has resulted in lexical borrowings, code-switching, and adaptations in pronunciation and sentence formation. These influences have enriched the linguistic and cultural identity of the region, making Kokborok an important bridge between different ethnic and linguistic groups.

This volume aims to explore the influence of Kokborok on multilingualism and cultural exchange in Northeast India, focusing on its interactions with other languages, its role in shaping cultural narratives, and its impact on identity formation. By analyzing historical developments, linguistic trends, and socio-political factors, this study will highlight the challenges and opportunities that arise when an indigenous language like Kokborok navigates a multilingual environment.

2. Historical Interactions Between Kokborok and Other Languages

The evolution of Kokborok has been shaped by centuries of linguistic contact with neighbouring Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages. As an ancient language of the Borok people, Kokborok has coexisted with Bengali, Assamese, Hindi, Meitei (Manipuri), and other indigenous languages, leading to a complex history of language exchange, adaptation, and borrowing.

2.1 Kokborok and Indo-Aryan Influence

With the expansion of Indo-Aryan languages in the eastern and northeastern parts of India, Kokborok began absorbing elements from Bengali and Hindi, particularly in administrative, legal, and modern



education contexts. The Manikya dynasty, which ruled Tripura for centuries, used Bengali for governance, leading to lexical borrowings and script usage influences in Kokborok.

For example:

- Bengali-origin words in Kokborok:
 - *Boi* (book) → from Bengali "boi"
 - *Ain* (law) → from Bengali "ain"
 - *Shikhani* (learning/education) → from Bengali "shiksha"
 - *Chosma* (spectacle) → from Bengali "kolom".
 - *Khata* (exercise book) → from Bengali "khata".
 - *Gori* (hand watch) → from Bengali "hat gari".
 - *Jandala* (window) → from Bengali "janala".

2.2 Kokborok and Tibeto-Burman Connections

Kokborok shares structural, phonetic, and lexical similarities with other Tibeto-Burman languages such as Bodo, Dimasa, Garo, and Meitei (Manipuri). These languages belong to the same linguistic family, resulting in shared vocabulary, sentence structures, and tonal patterns.

For instance:

- Similar words in Kokborok and Bodo:
 - Water → *Twi* (Kokborok) / *Dwi* (Bodo)
 - Fire → *Hor* (Kokborok) / *Or* (Bodo)
 - House → *Nok* (Kokborok) / *Noh* (Bodo)
 - Rice → *Mairung* (Kokborok) / *Mirong* (Bodo)
 - I → *Ang* (Kokborok) / *Ang* (Bodo)
 - Egg → *Bwtwi* (Kokborok) / *Bidwi* (Bodo)
- Similar words in Kokborok and Dimasa
 - I → *Ang* (Kokborok) / *Ang* (Dimasa)
 - My → *Ani* (Kokborok) / *Ani* (Dimasa)



- Rice → Mairung (Kokborok) / Mairong (Dimasa)
 Me → Ano (Kokborok) / Anigkhe(Dimasa)
- Similar words in Kokborok and Meitei:
 - To eat → Cha (Kokborok) / Cha (Meitei)
 - Chair → Maicha (Kokborok) / Maicha (Meitei)
 - Dog → Swi (Kokborok) / Hui (Meitei)
 - To ask → Swng (Kokborok) / Hong (Meitei)
 - Similar words in Kokborok and Garo
 - Peddy → Mai (Kokborok) / Mi / Migil (Garo)
 - Rice → Mai (Kokborok) / Merongl (Garo)
 - House → Nok (Kokborok) / Nok (Garo)
 - Bird → Tok (Kokborok) / Do (Garo)
 - Similar words in Kokborok and Angami Naga
 - Two → kwnwi (Kokborok) / Kenna (Angami Naga)
 - Nine → Chuku (Kokborok) / Teku (Angami Naga)
 - Eat → Cha (Kokborok) / Chi (Angami Naga)
 - Similar words in Kokborok and Chang Naga
 - Salth → Som (Kokborok) / Sok (Chang Naga)
 - Road → Lama (Kokborok) / Lam (Chang Naga)
 - Money → Rang (Kokborok) / Raka (Chang Naga)
 - Similar words in Kokborok and Tibetan
 - To eat → Cha (Kokborok) / Ja (Tibetan)
 - To ask → Swng (Kokborok) / gosung (Tibetan)
 - Eye → Muk/mokol (Kokborok) / Mik (Tibetan)
 - Common grammatical structures in Kokborok and Dimasa:
 - Both languages follow SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) word order.
 - Both use postpositions instead of prepositions (e.g., "Nok-o / Nogo" (house in) instead of "In the house").

2.3 Impact of Colonial and Post-Colonial Language Policies



During the British colonial period, English became a dominant administrative language, influencing education, official communication, and linguistic preferences in Tripura. This shift towards English and Bengali led to a decline in the formal use of Kokborok in governance, limiting its role in the written domain.

After Tripura merged with India in 1949, Bengali was officially adopted as the primary administrative language, further influencing linguistic preferences and educational policies. However, the resurgence of Kokborok in governance, literature, and academia in recent decades has led to language revival movements, reinforcing its role in Tripura's multilingual identity.

3. Code-Switching and Borrowed Lexicon in Kokborok

Multilingualism in Tripura has led to code-switching and lexical borrowing, where Kokborok speakers incorporate Bengali, Hindi, English, and other tribal languages into daily speech. These linguistic adaptations occur due to social interactions, education, governance, and media exposure.

3.1 Code-Switching in Everyday Communication

Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages within a conversation. In Tripura, many Kokborok speakers frequently mix Bengali and Hindi in their speech, especially in urban areas where bilingualism is widespread.

For example:

- "Nwng school thangwi da tong? exam rwdi."
(*Are you going to school? Give your exam.*)
 - *Nwng*(Kokborok) = You
 - *Tumi ki School jase?* (Bengali) = Are you going to school?
 - *Exam rwdi*(Kokborok) = Give the exam

This mixing of languages reflects both linguistic adaptability and cultural exchange.

3.2 Borrowed Words in Kokborok

Kokborok has incorporated loanwords from Bengali, Hindi, and English, especially in areas like education, administration, and technology.



- From Bengali
 - *Ain* (law) → Bengali "ain"
 - *Shikhani* (learning) → Bengali "shiksha"
 - *Boi* (book) → Bengali "boi"
- From Hindi
 - *Adalat* (court) → Hindi "adalat"
 - *Sarak* (road) → Hindi "sadak"
 - *Sabji* (vegetables) → Hindi "sabzi"
- From English
 - *School* → English
 - *Phone* → English
 - *Doctor* → English

3.3 The Influence of Media and Education

With the growth of television, social media, and digital platforms, Bengali, Hindi, and English words have become common in Kokborok discourse. Many young people use English terms for technology-related words, as there are no direct Kokborok equivalents.

For example:

- "Nini mobile charger tode tong?"
(*Do you have a mobile charger?*)
 - *Mobile* (English) = Mobile
 - *Tode* (Kokborok) = Have
 - *Charger* (English) = Charger

This fusion of languages showcases the adaptability of Kokborok speakers in a multilingual environment while also highlighting the need for language preservation efforts.

4. Kokborok's Role in Cultural Exchange

Kokborok has historically played a crucial role in cultural exchange between various ethnic groups in Tripura and neighbouring regions. As a language of oral traditions, storytelling, music, and festivals, Kokborok has facilitated inter-community interactions, shared cultural practices, and cross-linguistic



influences. For instance, during marriage ceremonies, Borok people have started to dress the bride and groom in a sari, blouse, duti, and shirt, while Brahmins chant mantras instead of following the traditional practice of taking Ochai and wearing their own traditional wedding attire.

4.1 *Kokborok in Festivals and Rituals*

Festivals serve as important spaces for cultural exchange, where different communities interact, share traditions, and influence each other's customs. Many tribal and non-tribal groups in Tripura participate in Kokborok-based celebrations, strengthening social cohesion and linguistic diversity.

- **Garia Puja** – Celebrated by the Borok people, this festival honours the deity Garia, seeking blessings for prosperity and good harvests. During the event, songs, dances, and chants in Kokborok create a shared cultural experience between different linguistic communities. For examples, one week before Garia Puja, the Borok people celebrate the Boisu/Bisor festival, while the Assamese people celebrate the Bihu festival. Both festivals include songs and dances, which often contain slang words. The way of celebration is almost the same.
- **Ker Festival** – A sacred ritual of the Borok people, observed in silence, reflecting traditional religious practices unique to the region. Outsiders are not allowed to enter the village during the puja. If anyone enters unknowingly, they must provide compensation, as this is a strict rule.
- **Mamita Festival** – A post-harvest celebration where tribal communities engage in drinking wine, eating, storytelling, folk songs, and dances, often incorporating elements from neighboring cultures. This festival is celebrated after the harvest of jhum cultivation in September or October. It is a time of merrymaking after a year of hard work. The festival is similar to the Bengali festival 'Nabanna'.

4.2 *Cross-Linguistic Influence in Folktales and Music*

Kokborok folklore has influenced and been influenced by other indigenous and non-indigenous languages, resulting in a shared repository of myths, legends, and folk songs.

- **Folktales** – Many traditional stories in Kokborok share common themes with Bodo, Dimasa, and Meitei folktales, demonstrating historical linguistic and cultural connections. In these stories, elements of nature such as forests, trees, birds, and animals can speak like human beings.



- Music – Traditional Borok songs, such as *Jadu Koliya* and *Tangbiti*, have influenced contemporary music genres, incorporating elements from Bengali folk music, Hindi film songs, and Western musical styles.

4.3 Bilingual Theatre and Literature

With the rise of Kokborok literature and theatre, multilingual adaptations have become common. Plays and literary works often include Bengali, Hindi, or English dialogues, making them accessible to diverse audiences while maintaining indigenous storytelling traditions.

For example:

- Bilingual poetry collections featuring Kokborok and Bengali verses.
- Plays and drama performances incorporating both Kokborok and Hindi dialogues to reach wider audiences.

These exchanges enhance the visibility of Kokborok culture beyond tribal communities and contribute to linguistic diversity in artistic expression.

5. The Role of Education in Multilingualism

Education plays a crucial role in maintaining and promoting multilingualism in Tripura, where Kokborok, Bengali, Hindi, and English coexist in the academic and social spheres. The integration of Kokborok in school curricula, higher education, and bilingual education models has contributed to language preservation while fostering cross-cultural communication.

5.1 The Introduction of Kokborok in Schools and Universities

The formal teaching of Kokborok in primary, secondary, and higher education has helped institutionalize the language and reinforce its relevance in an evolving linguistic environment.

- Since the 1980s, Kokborok has been introduced in primary schools, ensuring early exposure to the language.
- In 2011, Kokborok was formally introduced in colleges and universities, enabling academic research and linguistic development.



- Postgraduate programs in Kokborok at Tripura University and Maharaja Bir Bikram University provide advanced studies and literary research opportunities.

However, challenges remain, such as limited Kokborok teaching materials, lack of trained faculty, and resource constraints, which hinder the full implementation of multilingual education.

5.2 Bilingual and Multilingual Education Models

Bilingual and multilingual education frameworks ensure cultural and linguistic balance by teaching Kokborok alongside Bengali, Hindi, and English.

- Bilingual Education:
 - In some schools, Kokborok is taught alongside Bengali, helping students navigate both tribal and non-tribal communication spaces.
 - Schools in tribal-dominated areas emphasize Kokborok as the primary language while offering Bengali and English as secondary languages.
- Multilingual Education:
 - Higher education institutions integrate Bengali, Hindi, and English in Kokborok courses, making linguistic transitions smoother.
 - Government initiatives focus on creating Kokborok-language study materials while maintaining a multilingual approach to education.

5.3 The Role of Digital Education in Language Learning

With the rise of digital learning platforms, mobile applications, and e-learning resources, Kokborok is gaining more accessibility in education.

- Mobile apps and online courses offer interactive learning experiences for students and researchers.
- YouTube channels and educational websites provide grammar lessons, folktale narrations, and pronunciation guides in Kokborok.



- Government-supported online programs help promote language learning among youth and non-native speakers.

These initiatives contribute to language preservation and adaptation, allowing Kokborok speakers to engage with multilingualism without losing their linguistic identity.

6. Challenges and Future Prospects of Kokborok in a Multilingual Society

Despite its rich heritage and linguistic significance, Kokborok faces challenges in maintaining its prominence in a rapidly evolving multilingual society. These challenges stem from sociopolitical factors, language shift trends, and globalization, which influence linguistic preferences among younger generations.

6.1 Challenges in Multilingual Education and Governance

- Limited institutional support: While Kokborok has been introduced in educational institutions, there is a shortage of trained faculty, standardized textbooks, and learning materials.
- Dominance of Bengali and English: The preference for Bengali in governance and English in higher education and employment has led to a decline in Kokborok usage in official and academic settings.
- Code-mixing and language shift: Young speakers often mix Kokborok with Bengali, Hindi, or English, leading to a gradual dilution of linguistic purity.

6.2 Future Prospects: Expanding the Role of Kokborok

- Linguistic Standardization and Policy Implementation
 - Establishing a standard script for Kokborok (Roman or Bengali) to unify written forms.
 - Enhancing government policies to include Kokborok in administrative and legal processes.
 - Promoting Kokborok in digital governance and public services to increase accessibility.
- Strengthening Digital and Media Presence
 - Expanding Kokborok-language content on social media, YouTube, and online platforms.



- Encouraging the creation of news outlets, podcasts, and literature in Kokborok.
- Supporting Kokborok-language cinema, music, and theatre to reach wider audiences.
- Enhancing Research and Collaboration
 - Establishing linguistic research centers for the development of Kokborok grammar, syntax, and literature.
 - Collaborating with national and international language preservation organizations like UNESCO to promote Kokborok in global discussions on indigenous languages.

7. Conclusion

Kokborok plays a vital role in Tripura's multilingual landscape, fostering cultural identity, linguistic diversity, and cross-community interaction. Despite challenges such as language shift, policy gaps, and resource constraints, ongoing efforts in education, governance, and digital engagement have strengthened the language's resilience.

By adopting bilingual and multilingual education models, expanding research and linguistic documentation, and leveraging technology for language preservation, Kokborok can thrive as both a cultural heritage and a modern communicative tool. The future of Kokborok depends on collaborative efforts between government bodies, academic institutions, and cultural organizations, ensuring its continued relevance in Tripura and beyond.

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