The Evolution of Kokborok Grammar: A Comparative Analysis of the Agartala and Rural Dialects

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

[1] Ex-Guest Faculty, Department of Kokborok, Tripura University, Tripura, India, 799022,

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

*Corresponding Author: pritilatadebbarma@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper **Accepted:** 28-02-2026 **Published:** 10-03-2026 **Keywords:** *Kokborok; Agartala dialect; rural dialects; grammatical variation; dialect levelling; language change, unintelligible*	This study examines the synchronic variation in Kokborok through a comparative analysis of the urban Agartala variety and non-urban (rural) Kokborok dialects. Treating the Agartala variety as a reference point shaped by education, administration, and sustained contact with Bengali and Hindi, the paper analyzes differences across phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Drawing on field-based qualitative observations and speaker data, the study highlights patterns of dialect levelling, simplification, and lexical borrowing in the urban variety, alongside the retention of conservative grammatical features in rural speech. Special attention is given to tonal realization, affix usage, tense-aspect marking, clause structure, and code-mixing tendencies. The findings suggest that urban influence has contributed to structural shifts that may gradually erode traditional forms, particularly among younger speakers. While avoiding prescriptive recommendations, the study underscores the implications of dialect variation for language teaching, curriculum development, and the broader process of standardization. By documenting contemporary grammatical divergence within Kokborok, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions on language change, identity, and linguistic sustainability in Tripura.

1. Introduction

Kokborok, a major Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Tripura and adjoining regions, exhibits notable internal variation across geographical and social domains. While traditionally rooted in rural speech communities, the language has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, particularly in urban centres such as Agartala. The Reang dialect spoken in the Kanchanpur region shows considerable variation due to the influence of the Lushai (Mizo) language, as these communities live near the Jampui Hills. The emergence of an urban variety, influenced by formal education, administrative usage, and sustained contact with Bengali, Hindi, and English, has led to observable shifts in grammatical structure. These changes are most evident in phonological realization, affix usage, sentence construction, and lexical selection.

The Agartala variety, shaped by schooling systems, bureaucratic communication, and increased bilingualism, increasingly functions as a semi-standard urban form of Kokborok. In contrast, rural and non-urban dialects retain more conservative grammatical features that reflect earlier patterns of usage. The coexistence of these varieties raises important questions about grammatical change, dialect leveling, and the future direction of Kokborok as a developing literary and academic language.

This study adopts a synchronic approach, focusing exclusively on present-day structural differences between the Agartala variety and broader rural Kokborok speech. The aim is not to prescribe a standard form but to describe the evolving grammatical landscape of the language. By treating the Agartala dialect as the reference variety, the paper examines how urbanization and language contact have influenced phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon.

Understanding these internal variations is essential for multiple reasons. First, dialect differences affect classroom instruction, textbook preparation, and examination systems. Second, grammatical change often reflects broader sociolinguistic dynamics, including prestige, identity formation, and generational shifts. Finally, documenting these variations contributes to the long-term preservation of Kokborok by recording structural features that may otherwise weaken under urban influence.

Through systematic comparison, this paper seeks to provide a detailed account of how Kokborok grammar evolving within Tripura's contemporary linguistic environment.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, field-based descriptive approach to examine synchronic dialectical variation between the Agartala urban variety and non-urban (rural) Kokborok speech. The data were

collected through structured and semi-structured interactions with native speakers from different age groups and social backgrounds. Informants included urban speakers residing in Agartala who have exposure to formal education and administrative domains, as well as rural speakers from non-urban areas where Kokborok continues to function as the primary medium of daily communication.

The sample was designed to capture generational differences by including speakers from three broad age categories: older adults (above 50 years), middle-aged speakers (30–50 years), and younger speakers (15–29 years). This stratification allowed the observation of ongoing dialectical change and potential dialect leveling, particularly among younger urban speakers who demonstrate higher levels of bilingualism in Bengali and English.

Data collection methods included books, elicitation tasks, spontaneous conversational recordings, and targeted dialectical prompts focusing on phonological realization, tense–aspect marking, pluralization, case marking, negation, and clause construction. Lexical comparison was also conducted by compiling frequently used everyday vocabulary across domains such as household activities, agriculture, administration, and education.

In the phonological analysis, selected words were transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to illustrate tonal and segmental differences between varieties. For morphological and syntactic sections, examples are presented in standardized Romanized Kokborok to maintain clarity and accessibility.

The study treats the Agartala variety as the reference variety due to its increasing prestige, visibility in education, and growing influence in media and administration. Rural forms are compared against this urban reference to identify patterns of simplification, borrowing, retention, or structural divergence. The analysis remains descriptive and does not advocate prescriptive standardization.

By combining direct speaker observation with structured comparison, the methodology aims to provide an accurate and balanced account of present-day grammatical evolution within Kokborok.

3. A Comparative Analysis of Agartala and Rural Dialects with Reference to Bengali and Mandarin

The originality and historical development of the Kokborok language have long been a subject of scholarly attention. Kokborok, a major Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Tripura, adjoining regions, and parts of Northeast India, exhibits notable internal variation across geographical and social domains.

Over long periods of geographical separation and community interaction, the language has developed diverse dialects. Traditionally rooted in rural speech communities across different regions, Kokborok has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, particularly with increasing social and educational changes.

Historically, Kokborok shares linguistic roots with several other languages of the Sino-Tibetan language family, including Bodo, Dimasa, Garo, Raba, Hajong, Mech, Koch, and Tiwa. These languages are believed to have evolved from a common ancestral linguistic source. In the early periods, the absence of a written tradition meant that Kokborok and related languages were transmitted orally from generation to generation. Over time, geographical separation, social interaction, and cultural developments contributed to the formation of distinct languages and dialects.

The relationship between Bodo and Kokborok provides an illustrative example of this linguistic divergence. Both languages belong to the same Sino-Tibetan language family and share a considerable degree of similarity in vocabulary. The extent of this relationship can be demonstrated through comparative lexical examples from the two languages. However, despite these similarities, noticeable differences also exist, suggesting that the two languages diverged from each other many centuries ago.

Linguistic scholars often use a method known as **glottochronology** to estimate the approximate time of separation between related languages. This approach, developed by the renowned linguist Dr. H. A. Gleason, proposes that if approximately 66% of the basic morpheme stock in two languages remains cognate, it can be assumed that the languages separated about 1000 years ago. If only about 44% of the morphemes are cognate, the probable period of separation may be around 2000 years.

The degree of similarity between Kokborok and Bodo can also be observed in their pronunciation and vocabulary. In many cases, both languages share words that have nearly identical pronunciation and carry the same meaning. This similarity reflects their common origin within the Bodo–Garo subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman language family.

The following examples illustrate cases where Kokborok and Bodo words have the same or very similar pronunciation as well as the same meaning:

Words with the same pronunciation and meaning in Kokborok and Bodo.

Kokborok	Bodo	Meang
Ang	Ang	I

Ba	Ba	Five
Phung	Phung	Morning

Words with slight differences in pronunciation but with the same meaning in Kokborok and Bodo.

Kokborok	Bodo	Meaning
Abuk	Abu	Breast
Beng	Bema	Spider
Butwi	Bidwi	Egg

In certain lexical items, the Kokborok consonants /k/, /p/, and /t/ correspond to /g/, /b/, and /d/ respectively in the Bodo language.

Kokborok	Bodo	Meang
Kaham	Gaham	Good
Kap	Gap	to weep/ cry
Kupa	Gupa	to vomting

**In certain lexical items, the Kokborok consonant /t/ corresponds to /d/ in Bodo.**

Kokborok	Bodo	Meaning
Tuku	Duku	to take bath
Twi	Dwi	Water
Tang	Dang	to touch

In some cases, Kokborok words ending with /k/ correspond to /au/, /ou/, or /a/ in Bodo.

Kokborok	Bodo	Meang
Tok	Dau	A bird
Thok	Thau	Oil

| Kwrak | Gwrau | Hard |

Kokborok, a major Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Tripura and adjoining regions, exhibits notable internal variation across geographical and social domains. While traditionally rooted in rural speech communities, the language has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, particularly in urban centres such as Agartala. The Reang dialect spoken in the Dhalai district also shows considerable variation, as it has been influenced by the Lushai (Mizo) language from the nearby Jampui Hills. The emergence of an urban variety, influenced by formal education, administrative usage, and sustained contact with Bengali, Hindi, and English, has led to observable shifts in grammatical structure. These changes are most evident in phonological realization, affix usage, sentence construction, and lexical selection. The following Sino-Tibetan language family chart clearly illustrates how these languages and dialects have gradually diverged from one another over time.
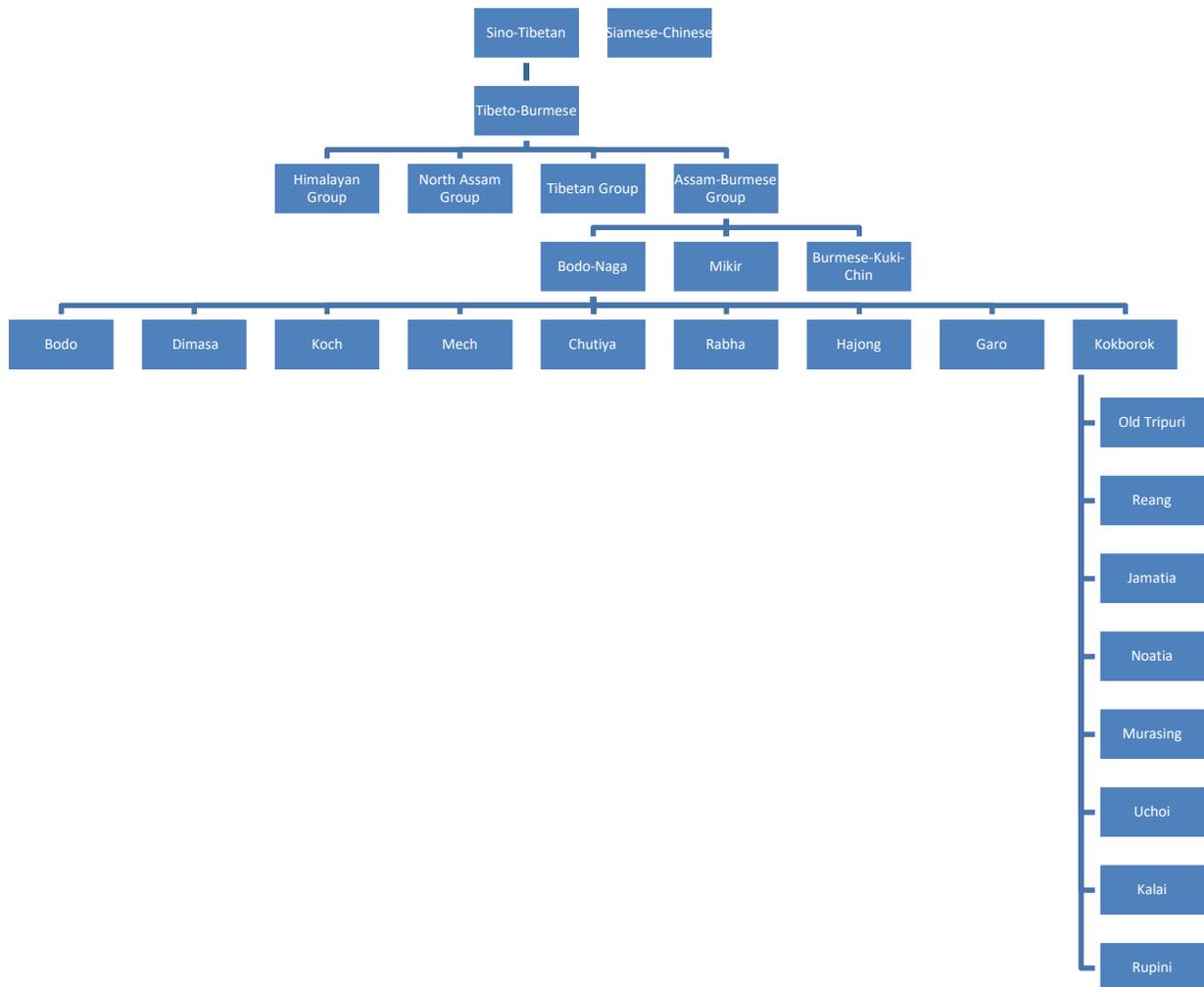
<u>Sino- Tibetan Language Family Relation with Kokborok Language and Dialects</u>

Two prominent examples of how dialects gradually developed into major standardized languages can be observed in the cases of **Bengali in India** and **Mandarin in China**. These languages illustrate how regional dialects, historical evolution, and political influence contribute to the formation of dominant linguistic standards.

The Bengali language evolved over more than a thousand years from **Magadhi Prakrit**, approximately between **1000 and 1200 CE**. Its development was shaped by various regional, religious, and political influences. Over time, different dialectal varieties emerged across Bengal. The form known today as **Standard Modern Bengali**, which developed during the **19th and 20th centuries**, is primarily based on the **West-Central dialect of the Nadia–Kolkata region**. In contrast, eastern dialects, such as those spoken in **Dhaka and Chittagong**, retain several older phonetic and structural features that differ from the standardized variety.

3.1 Historical Evolution of Dialects

Historical Evolution of Bengali Dialects

i.   **Old Bengali (c. 650–1200 CE):** Old Bengali developed from **Magadhi Prakrit** and the eastern Indo-Aryan linguistic tradition, particularly **Purbi Apabhramsa**. The earliest known literary evidence of this stage of the language is found in the **Charyapada**, a collection of mystical Buddhist verses composed between the 8th and 12th centuries.

ii. **Middle Bengali (1200–1800 CE):** Following the **Turkish conquest of Bengal in 1204**, the Bengali language underwent significant transformation. During this period, the language absorbed numerous lexical and cultural influences from **Persian, Arabic, and Turkish**, particularly in the eastern regions of Bengal.

iii. **Standardization (19th Century):**The modern literary standard of Bengali, known as **Choltibhasha**, emerged during the 19th century. It was primarily based on the **West-Central dialect of the Nadia–Kolkata region**, including areas such as the **24 Parganas**, which later became the foundation of Standard Modern Bengali used in literature, education, and administration.

Major Bengali Dialects and Regional Variations

- **Rarhi (Standard Bengali):**

Originating in the **Bhagirathi–Hooghly river basin** (including Kolkata, Nadia, and Howrah), this dialect forms the basis of **Standard Colloquial Bengali (Cholitabhasha)** used in modern media, literature, and education.

- **Bangali (Eastern / Bangladesh):**

  Predominant in central, eastern, and southern regions of Bangladesh (such as Dhaka, Comilla, and Noakhali). This dialect group includes several distinct and highly varied sub-dialects, notably **Sylheti** and **Chittagonian**, which possess unique phonological and lexical features.

- **Varendri (North Bengal):**

  Spoken in areas such as **Malda, Dinajpur**, and parts of the **Rajshahi division**, this dialect represents the northern linguistic variety of the Bengali-speaking region.

- **Manbhumi / Western Dialect:**

  Used in the western districts of West Bengal, including **Bankura, Purulia, and Midnapore**, as well as neighboring areas of **Jharkhand**. This dialect often shows influence from nearby tribal and regional languages.

- **Rajbanshi / Rangpuri (North Bengal):**

  Spoken in **northern West Bengal and parts of Assam**, this dialect has been influenced by neighboring languages such as **Koch** and **Rabha**, giving it distinctive phonetic and lexical characteristics.

- **Sundarbani:**

  Spoken in the **southern coastal areas of West Bengal**, particularly around the Sundarbans region. It is often considered part of the broader and diverse dialectal spectrum of Bengali.

The Eight Major Chinese Languages and Their Distinctive Features:

- **Mandarin (Putonghua):**

  The Northern Chinese variety and the official language of China, spoken by approximately **70% of the population**. It is used in government, education, and national communication.

- **Jin Chinese (Jinyu):**

Commonly spoken in **Shanxi Province** and parts of **central Inner Mongolia**. It is sometimes classified separately from Mandarin due to its distinctive phonological features.

- **Cantonese (Yue):**

Spoken primarily in **Guangdong Province**, including **Guangzhou**, as well as in **Hong Kong and Macau**. Cantonese is known for its complex tonal system and rich cultural presence in media and commerce.

- **Wu (Shanghainese):**

Predominantly spoken in **Shanghai and the surrounding Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions**. Wu dialects are characterized by their soft phonetic quality and significant internal variation.

- **Min (Taiwanese / Southern Min):**

Spoken mainly in **Fujian Province** (including Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Zhangzhou) and widely used in **Taiwan**. This group includes several sub-varieties with considerable phonological diversity.

- **Hakka (Kejia – "Guest People"):**

Spoken by the **Hakka ethnic communities** across **southern China**, including parts of **Taiwan, Guangdong, Jiangxi, and Fujian**. Hakka retains several archaic linguistic features.

- **Gan:**

Spoken mainly in **Jiangxi Province** and parts of neighboring **Hunan, Anhui, and Fujian**. Gan Chinese developed historically from Middle Chinese and maintains distinctive vocabulary and pronunciation.

- **Xiang (Hunanese):**

Spoken primarily in **Hunan Province**. Xiang Chinese is often divided into **Old Xiang** and **New Xiang**, reflecting different degrees of influence from Mandarin.

The Kokborok Language and Its Eight Dialects:

- **Old Tripuri:**

Often referred to as the **Agartala dialect**, this variety is widely used in administrative and educational contexts. It is spoken by the largest portion of the Kokborok-speaking population, particularly in western Tripura.

- **Reang (Bru):**

  The **Bru (Borok) dialect** is spoken by the Reang community across the **northern and southern parts of Tripura**. It represents the second-largest Kokborok-speaking group.

- **Jamatia (Ochai):**

  The **Jamatia dialect** is primarily spoken in regions such as **Udaipur, Amarpur, Teliamura, and Sonamura**.

- **Nuatia (Khaklu):**

  The **Nuatia dialect** is spoken in areas including **Sabroom, Belonia, Amarpur, Hokutwisa, and Gandatwisa**.

- **Murasing:**

  The **Murasing dialect** is spoken in places such as **Twiuandal, Patichhara, and Sonamura**.

- **Uchoi:**

  The **Uchoi dialect** is spoken by a relatively small community, mainly in **Depacherra in Gomati District of Tripura**.

- **Kalai:**

  The **Kalai dialect** is spoken in **Sepahijala District**, including areas such as **Jampuijala, Twisarangchak, Darkai, Teliamura, and Ompi**.

- **Rupini:**

  The **Rupini dialect** is spoken in **Sadar Champaknagar, Sadhupara, Birgudas, Raktia, Khamting, and Teliamura**.

Observations from comparative linguistic studies indicate that, similar to **Mandarin in China** and **Bengali in India**, the Kokborok language also consists of multiple dialects that evolved from a common

linguistic origin. While the root vocabulary across these dialects often remains similar, variations arise through the addition or modification of phonemes in nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, tense markers, consonants, suffixes, and prefixes. Some lexical differences may also result from contact with neighboring languages.

Kokborok dialects are strongly influenced by clan-based linguistic variation, with major varieties including **Debbarma (Old Tripuri)**, **Reang (Kaubru)**, **Jamatia**, and others such as **Dona, Beri, and Daspa**. These dialects are mainly spoken in rural **jhum (shifting cultivation) areas** and are often distinct from the standardized **urban Agartala dialect**.

One notable phonological difference between urban and rural dialects appears in final consonant realization. Words that end with **"-k"** in the Agartala dialect often change to **"-au"** in dialects such as **Reang, Kalai, and Rupini**. For example:

- **thok** (oil) → **thou**

- **tok** (bird) → **tau**

- **kok** (word) → **kau**

These variations illustrate how phonological shifts contribute to dialect differentiation within the Kokborok language while maintaining a shared linguistic foundation.

Key Rural Dialects and Variations:

- **Debbarma (Old Tripuri):**

  Considered the standard dialect of Kokborok, this variety is spoken across many regions and is often used in literature, education, and formal communication.

- **Reang (Kaubru):**

  Widely spoken in **Dhalai and North Tripura**, this dialect exhibits distinct phonetic and tonal differences when compared to standard Kokborok.

- **Jamatia and Nuatia:**

  These dialects are generally similar to standard Kokborok but display slight regional variations in pronunciation and tonal patterns.

- **Dona Dialect:**

    A unique and endangered variety found in limited areas of **Sepahijala District**, particularly in **Charilam and Nalchhar**.

- **Phonetic Variations:**

    Rural dialects such as **Reang, Uchoi, Kalai, and Rupini** often replace the final **"-k"** sound found in the Agartala dialect with **"-au."**

- **Clan and Sub-Dialects:**

    Many of these dialect groups contain localized sub-dialects that are closely associated with specific clans, communities, and traditional occupational practices.

These rural dialects are largely oral in nature and reflect deeply rooted agricultural and traditional lifestyles. They often show noticeable differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, and tone, which can sometimes lead to partial unintelligibility between speakers of different dialects.

To illustrate the extent of phonetic variation between the **Agartala dialect** and **rural dialects**, the following example sentence can be examined:

"My name is Subrai. I live in Harung village. I am a jhum cultivator."

- Agartala Dialect: Ani mung (bumung) Subrai. Ang Harung kamio tongo. Ang huk khwlaio.
- **Reang** Dialect: Aini ummung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongou. Ang huk kheou.
- **Jamatia dialect: Ani bwmwng Subrai. Ang Harung kamio tongw. Ang huk kholaiw.**
- **Nuatia dialect: Ani bwmung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongo. Ang huk khwlaio..**
- **Murasing dialect: Ani mung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongu. Ang huk khwlai chau.**
- **Uchoi dialect: Ani mung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongmi. Ang huk khaimi.**
- **Kalai dialec: Ani bumung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongw. Ang huk khwlaio.**
- **Rupini dialect: Ani bumung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongw. Ang huk khwlaio.**

4. Phonological Variation

Phonological Variation Between the Agartala Urban Variety and Rural Kokborok

Phonological variation between the **Agartala urban variety** and **rural Kokborok dialects** is one of the most noticeable markers of dialect differentiation. Differences can be observed in **tonal realization, vowel quality, consonant articulation, and phonetic reduction**. These variations reflect both internal linguistic developments and external influences, particularly from **Bengali**, which has had a strong impact on the urban speech environment.

Kokborok dialects also vary significantly according to **clan and regional distribution**. Major dialectal groups include **Debbarma (Old Tripuri)**, **Reang (Kaubru)**, **Jamatia**, and other varieties such as **Dona, Beri, and Daspa**. These dialects are mainly spoken in rural areas, especially in **jhum (shifting cultivation) regions**, and often differ considerably from the standardized **urban Agartala dialect**.

One of the most notable phonological differences occurs in the **final consonant realization**. Words that end with **"-k"** in the Agartala dialect frequently change to **"-au"** in dialects such as **Reang, Kalai, and Rupini**. For example:

- **thok** (oil) → **thou**

- **tok** (bird) → **tau**

- **kok** (word) → **kau**

Key Rural Dialects and Variations

- **Debbarma (Old Tripuri):** Considered the standard dialect of Kokborok and spoken across many regions. It is frequently used in literature and formal communication.

- **Reang (Kaubru):** Widely spoken in **Dhalai and North Tripura**, this dialect displays distinct phonetic and tonal characteristics compared to standard Kokborok.

- **Jamatia and Nuatia:** These dialects are largely similar to standard Kokborok but exhibit slight regional differences in pronunciation and tonal patterns.

- **Dona Dialect:** A unique and endangered variety found in limited areas of **Sepahijala District**, particularly in **Charilam and Nalchhar**.

- **Phonetic Variations:** Rural dialects such as **Reang, Uchoi, Kalai, and Rupini** often replace the final **"-k"** sound of the Agartala dialect with **"-au."**

- **Clan and Sub-Dialects:** Many communities maintain their own localized sub-dialects that are associated with specific **clans, settlements, and traditional occupations**.

Overall, these rural dialects remain largely **oral in nature** and reflect a deeply rooted **agricultural and traditional lifestyle**. Differences in **vocabulary, tone, and pronunciation** are sometimes substantial enough to create partial unintelligibility between speakers of different dialect groups.

4.1 Tonal Realization

Kokborok traditionally exhibits a two-tone system: high and low. In rural speech, tonal contrasts are generally more clearly maintained, with distinct pitch differences marking lexical meaning. For example, minimal tonal contrasts in rural pronunciation often preserve sharper pitch distinctions:

 /**bá**/ (high tone) meaning **"to carry on the back"**, vs. /**bà**/ (low tone) meaning **"five."**

 /**phúng**/ (high tone) meaning **"to be fat"**, vs. /**phùng**/ (low tone) meaning **"morning."**

 /**hór**/ (high tone) meaning **"fire"**, vs. /**hòr**/ (low tone) meaning **"night."**

Field observations indicate that older rural speakers maintain clearer tonal contrasts, with stable pitch contours and less variation. In contrast, the Agartala urban variety often shows partial tonal neutralization in rapid speech. Younger urban speakers sometimes reduce tonal distinctions, especially in code-mixed contexts where Bengali phonological influence reduces tonal prominence.

In certain lexical items, tonal contrast in rural speech is realized with stronger pitch height, whereas urban speech may exhibit flatter contours. This suggests an emerging tendency toward tonal weakening or levelling in urban environments.

4.2 Vowel Variation

Vowel quality differences are also observed between the urban and rural varieties of Kokborok. Rural Kokborok generally retains a clearer articulation of central and back vowels, whereas urban speech often shows subtle phonetic shifts influenced by Bengali phonology. For example, the high back unrounded vowel /ɯ/ in rural pronunciation may be approximated toward /u/ or /o/ in urban speech.

Another notable variation appears in the realization of final consonants. In several rural dialects, words that end with **"-k"** in the Agartala dialect frequently change to **"-au."** This feature is particularly observed in dialects such as **Reang, Kalai, and Rupini**. For instance:

- **thok** (oil) → **thou**

- **tok** (bird) → **tau**

- **kok** (word) → **kau**

These phonological differences illustrate how regional dialects of Kokborok preserve distinct sound patterns while remaining part of the same linguistic system.

In IPA comparison:

- Rural: /ɯ/ maintained distinctly

- Urban: /u/ or centralized /ə/ substitution in fast speech

This vowel adjustment is especially noticeable among younger urban speakers educated primarily in Bengali-medium institutions.

4.3 Consonant Articulation and Reduction

Consonant clusters and final consonant articulations show variation as well. Rural speakers tend to preserve clearer word-final consonants, while urban speakers may exhibit consonant weakening or deletion in casual speech.

For example:

- Rural pronunciation retains clear final nasal articulation (/ŋ/)

- Urban speech may produce lighter nasalization or partial reduction

Additionally, aspirated and affricate sounds sometimes show Bengali-influenced pronunciation patterns in urban contexts.

4.4 Phonological Simplification and Contact Influence

The Agartala variety increasingly reflects phonological simplification, particularly in rapid urban speech. Tone reduction, vowel centralization, and consonant weakening appear more frequently among younger speakers. These changes correlate with high bilingualism and frequent code-switching with Bengali.

Rural varieties, by contrast, demonstrate more conservative phonological patterns, retaining sharper tonal contrasts and stable vowel quality. This suggests that urban phonological change may be part of a broader dialect-leveling process, influenced by administrative language dominance and educational exposure.

Overall, phonological variation reveals an emerging divergence between urban and rural Kokborok speech, with the Agartala variety showing gradual simplification and contact-induced modification.

5. Morphological Variation

Morphological variation between the Agartala urban variety and rural Kokborok is evident in affix usage, tense–aspect marking, pluralisation, and the degree of morphological retention. While Kokborok remains fundamentally agglutinative in structure, urban influence has contributed to partial simplification and borrowing tendencies in certain grammatical domains.

5.1 Tense and Aspect Marking

Kokborok verbs typically take suffixes to indicate tense and aspect. Common markers include:

- **-Chakha** (past) - Agartala dialect

- **-Chanai** (future) - Agartala dialect

- **-Chao / -di** (present or progressive contexts, depending on dialect)

- -Chaha **-** (past) - Reang dialect/ Rural

- **-Chanai**ha(future) - Reang dialect/ Rural

- **-Chao / -di** (present or progressive contexts, depending on dialect)

In rural speech, these suffixes are consistently and clearly attached to verb roots. For example:

- Ang cha-kha. (I ate.) Past Tense - Agartala dialect

- Ang cha-nai. (I will eat.) Future Tense- Agartala dialect

- Ang chao (I eat) Present Tense- Agartala dialect

Rural speakers tend to maintain fuller morphological marking even in spontaneous speech.

- Ang mai chaha. (I ate rice.) Past Tense - Reang dialect

- Ang mai cha-nai. (I will eat rice.) Future Tense- - Reang dialect

- Ang mai ch-o (I eat rice) Present Tense-- Reang dialect

In the Agartala variety, however, there is observable reduction in suffix clarity, especially in rapid urban conversation. Younger speakers sometimes shorten or phonologically reduce tense suffixes. In code-mixed contexts, tense marking may occasionally align structurally with Bengali sentence rhythm, resulting in partial simplification or omission in informal speech.

Although the morphological system itself remains intact, frequency of overt marking appears slightly lower in urban informal usage compared to rural contexts.

5.2 Pluralisation and Number Marking in Kokborok

Plural marking in Kokborok is generally achieved through suffixes or context-dependent markers. Rural speech tends to preserve traditional plural forms more consistently, particularly in reference to animate nouns.

In the Agartala variety, plural marking is sometimes replaced or influenced by Bengali-style plural conceptualization in bilingual discourse. Urban speakers may rely more on numerical quantifiers rather than explicit plural suffixes. This reflects a functional shift rather than structural loss, but it signals gradual change in morphological preference.

Older rural speakers typically maintain clearer distinction between singular and plural morphology, whereas urban youth may reduce overt plural marking in casual conversation.

5.3 Case Marking and Postpositional Usage in Kokborok

Kokborok uses postpositional elements and particles to indicate grammatical relationships. Rural varieties often maintain traditional case particles more consistently, particularly in possessive and locative constructions.

Urban speech shows a tendency toward structural simplification. Some case particles are used less frequently when sentence meaning can be inferred from context. Additionally, bilingual urban speakers occasionally mirror Bengali syntactic rhythm, affecting the frequency of explicit case marking.

However, it is important to note that the core case-marking system remains structurally stable across dialects; variation lies primarily in frequency and phonetic realization rather than grammatical replacement.

6. Syntactic Variation

Syntactic variation between the Agartala urban variety and rural Kokborok reflects both structural continuity and emerging shifts influenced by bilingualism and urban speech patterns. While Kokborok fundamentally follows a Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) structure across dialects, variation appears in clause formation, negation patterns, question construction, and the frequency of overt grammatical marking.

6.1 Basic Word Order and Clause Structure

Both varieties maintain the canonical SOV structure:

- Ang mai chao. (I eat rice.) Agartala dialect.

- Ang mai cha-o. (I eat rice.) Reang dialect.

Rural speech generally preserves strict adherence to this structure, particularly in narrative and formal contexts. Embedded clauses and subordinate constructions often follow traditional patterns with consistent placement of particles and postpositions.

The **Agartala variety of Kokborok** generally maintains the **Subject–Object–Verb (SOV)** word order that is characteristic of Tibeto-Burman languages. However, increased exposure to **Bengali** has occasionally influenced patterns of rhythm, emphasis, and discourse structure in urban speech. While the fundamental syntactic order rarely changes, urban speakers sometimes show slight reordering of elements for emphasis or clarity, particularly in situations involving **code-mixing**. These variations do not alter the core grammatical framework of Kokborok but rather reflect subtle effects of language contact.

To illustrate the extent of **phonetic variation between the Agartala dialect and rural dialects**, the following example sentence can be examined:

"My name is Subrai. I live in Harung village. I am a jhum cultivator."

This example helps demonstrate how pronunciation, vowel realization, and final consonant patterns may vary across different dialectal forms of Kokborok.

- Agartala Dialect: Ani mung (bumung) Subrai. Ang Harung kamio tongo. Ang huk khwlaio.

- Reang Dialect: Aini ummung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongou. Ang huk kheou.

- Jamatia dialect: Ani bwmwng Subrai. Ang Harung kamio tongw. Ang huk kholaiw.

- Nuatia dialect: Ani bwmung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongo. Ang huk khwlaio..

- Murasing dialect: Ani mung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongu. Ang huk khwlai chau.

- Uchoi dialect: Ani mung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongmi. Ang huk khaimi.

- Kalai dialec: Ani bumung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongw. Ang huk khwlaio.

- Rupini dialect: Ani bumung Subrai. Ang Harung parao tongw. Ang huk khwlaio.

6.2 Negation Patterns

Negation in Kokborok typically involves particles or suffixes such as ma or negative verb markers. Rural speakers consistently attach negation markers in traditional positions:

- Ang chaya. (I do not eat.)

- Ang nungya. (I do not drink.)

- Ang thuya. (I do not sleep.)

Urban speakers maintain the same negation system, but rapid speech often leads to phonological reduction of negative particles. In bilingual contexts, younger urban speakers occasionally align sentence rhythm more closely with Bengali negation patterns, though the grammatical system itself remains Kokborok-based.

The variation here is more phonetic and frequency-based than structural.

6.3 Complex Sentences and Subordination

Rural Kokborok often demonstrates more elaborate subordinate constructions in storytelling contexts, with clear use of connective particles and sequential markers.

Urban speech tends toward shorter clauses and simplified subordinate structures, particularly in informal settings. Complex embedding is less frequent among younger speakers, who may prefer shorter, segmented sentences. This syntactic simplification corresponds with broader trends of dialect leveling.

However, in formal academic or institutional contexts, urban speakers often reintroduce structured clause patterns, indicating that syntactic complexity has not been lost but varies by domain.

6.4 Code-Mixing and Structural Influence

One of the most noticeable syntactic features of the Agartala variety is the presence of code-mixing with Bengali and English. In mixed sentences, borrowed lexical items often retain Kokborok morphological markers but may follow Bengali-influenced phrasing patterns.

For example, an urban speaker may insert Bengali nouns while maintaining Kokborok verb morphology. This structural blending reflects bilingual competence rather than grammatical breakdown.

Rural speech, by contrast, shows significantly lower levels of code-mixing and maintains more homogeneous syntactic patterns.

Overall, syntactic variation between the Agartala and rural varieties does not involve radical structural change but reflects frequency shifts, clause simplification, and increased bilingual influence in the urban environment.

7. Lexical Variation

Lexical variation between the **Agartala-based (Old Tripuri) urban variety** and the **rural Kokborok dialects**—such as **Reang, Jamatia, Nuatia, Uchoi, Kalai, Murasing, and other Tripuri varieties**—is one of the most visible indicators of dialect differentiation. Although the core vocabulary remains largely **mutually intelligible** across these regions, noticeable differences arise in **borrowing patterns, semantic shifts, and the retention of traditional lexical items**. Urban varieties tend to incorporate more loanwords from **Bengali, Hindi, and English**, while rural dialects often preserve older indigenous terms and expressions that reflect traditional cultural practices and local environments.

Meaning	Agartala (Old Tripuri)	Jamatia	Kalai	Murasing	Nuatia	Reang	Rupini	Tripura	Uchoi
Belly	Ok	Ok	Ok	Ok	Ok	Ok	Ok	Ok	Hok
Star	Athukuri	Athukwrwi	Athukwrwi	Athukiri	Athukiri	Athukrui	Athukwrwi	Athukwrwi	Handugiri
Dream	Imang	Imang	Imang	Imang	Emang	Imang	Imang	Imang	Emang
Tadpole	Empuru	Ebru	Empru	Empru	Empru	Empru	Empuru	Empuru	Empru

7.1 Borrowing and Urban Lexical Influence

The Agartala variety exhibits a higher degree of lexical borrowing from Bengali and, to a lesser extent, English. This is particularly evident in domains related to education, administration, technology, and urban lifestyle. Terms for government offices, academic subjects, digital devices, and bureaucratic procedures are frequently borrowed directly or adapted phonologically into Kokborok.

For example, urban speakers often use borrowed words for "school," "office," "exam," or "mobile phone," "Television", "College", "Bazar" sometimes retaining Bengali phonetic patterns. These borrowed forms are typically integrated into Kokborok sentence structure with native morphological markers, demonstrating structural resilience despite lexical borrowing.

In contrast, rural speakers are more likely to use traditional Kokborok equivalents where available, especially in everyday domestic and agricultural contexts.

7.2 Retention of Traditional Vocabulary

Rural Kokborok retains a richer set of traditional lexical items, particularly in areas such as agriculture, bamboo craft, forest ecology, kinship terminology, and ritual practices. Many of these words are less frequently used in urban speech due to lifestyle changes.

Older rural speakers maintain vocabulary that reflects indigenous ecological knowledge and material culture. Younger urban speakers, however, may either replace such terms with generalized words or use borrowed Bengali alternatives. This results in lexical narrowing within the urban variety.

7.3 Semantic Shift and Usage Preference

In some cases, both varieties use the same lexical item but with slightly different usage frequency or semantic range. Urban speech may prefer broader, more generalized terms, while rural dialects maintain more precise lexical distinctions.

For instance, rural speech may preserve multiple terms for specific types of tools, baskets, or crops, whereas urban speakers may use a single generalized term. This indicates semantic leveling influenced by changing occupational and social environments.

7.4 Code-Mixed Lexicon and Youth Speech

Among younger Agartala speakers, code-mixing is especially frequent in informal conversation. Bengali and English lexical items are often inserted into Kokborok discourse without full phonological

adaptation. While sentence structure remains Kokborok-based, lexical switching is more common in urban youth speech than in rural communities.

This trend suggests an ongoing lexical shift that may gradually reshape the vocabulary pool of the urban variety. However, core grammatical words—such as pronouns, tense markers, and particles—remain predominantly Kokborok across both varieties, demonstrating structural stability despite lexical fluidity.

7.5 Lexical Divergence and Identity

Lexical choice increasingly functions as a social marker. Urban vocabulary signals education, administrative exposure, and modern lifestyle, while rural vocabulary signals cultural continuity and traditional identity. These lexical differences therefore extend beyond mere vocabulary variation and reflect broader sociolinguistic dynamics within Kokborok-speaking communities.

Overall, lexical variation between the Agartala and rural varieties illustrates a clear pattern of urban borrowing and simplification alongside rural retention of traditional forms. While mutual intelligibility remains strong, lexical divergence represents one of the most dynamic areas of ongoing change.

8. Sociolinguistic Implications

The grammatical and lexical variations observed between the Agartala urban variety and rural Kokborok are not merely structural phenomena; they reflect deeper sociolinguistic dynamics shaped by urbanization, prestige, bilingualism, and generational change. These implications are central to understanding the evolving identity of Kokborok in contemporary Tripura.

8.1 Urban Prestige and Dialect Levelling

The Agartala variety increasingly carries social prestige due to its association with education, government employment, media exposure, and urban mobility. As a result, younger speakers often perceive urban speech patterns as modern and socially advantageous. This prestige factor contributes to dialect levelling, where distinctive rural features gradually weaken in favour of more generalized urban forms.

Phonological simplification, reduced morphological marking, and increased lexical borrowing are particularly visible among younger speakers in urban settings. While such change is a natural process in language evolution, it may also lead to gradual erosion of conservative grammatical features that remain vibrant in rural communities.

8.2 Code-Mixing and Bengali Influence

High levels of bilingualism in Agartala significantly influence speech patterns. Code-mixing with Bengali occurs frequently in informal urban discourse, particularly in domains related to administration, education, and digital communication. Although Kokborok grammatical structure largely remains intact, repeated insertion of Bengali lexical items can alter speech rhythm and phonological realization.

This contact-induced influence may contribute to long-term structural convergence, especially if younger generations rely increasingly on bilingual or mixed forms. Rural speakers, by contrast, demonstrate lower levels of code-mixing and maintain more homogeneous linguistic patterns.

8.3 Generational Differences

Generational variation plays a crucial role in the evolution of Kokborok grammar. Older rural speakers tend to preserve fuller morphological marking, clearer tonal distinctions, and traditional vocabulary. Middle-aged speakers often display intermediate patterns, balancing traditional forms with modern influence.

Younger urban speakers show greater phonological reduction, lexical borrowing, and syntactic simplification. This generational gradient indicates that grammatical change is ongoing and socially conditioned rather than abrupt.

8.4 Education and Standardization Challenges

Dialect variation has direct implications for classroom instruction and textbook preparation. Educational materials often reflect a semi-standardized form influenced by urban usage. Students from rural backgrounds may encounter differences between home speech and textbook language, potentially affecting comprehension and confidence.

At the same time, the growing academic recognition of Kokborok—including higher education programs—elevates its prestige and encourages broader usage. However, without careful documentation of dialect variation, subtle rural grammatical features may receive less representation in formal contexts.

8.5 Identity and Linguistic Continuity

Language variation also intersects with identity formation. Urban speech may symbolize progress, mobility, and institutional access, while rural forms symbolize cultural authenticity and continuity. This dual symbolism creates tension between modernization and preservation.

The cautious perspective adopted in this study suggests that dialect leveling, while natural, should be carefully documented. Without systematic description, conservative features—especially phonological and morphological nuances—may gradually decline in frequency.

In summary, sociolinguistic factors play a decisive role in shaping grammatical evolution within Kokborok. Urban prestige, bilingual influence, generational change, and educational policy collectively contribute to the dynamic restructuring of the language.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined the synchronic dialectal variation between the Agartala-based (Old Tripuri) urban variety and the rural Kokborok dialects, including Reang, Jamatia, Nuatia, Uchoi, Kalai, Murasing, and Tripuri varieties. The analysis focused on differences in phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. While the foundational grammatical structure of Kokborok remains relatively stable across these varieties, noticeable differences have emerged as a result of urbanization, bilingualism, and changing sociolinguistic prestige dynamics.

Phonologically, the Agartala variety demonstrates tendencies toward tonal weakening, vowel centralization, and consonant reduction, particularly among younger speakers influenced by Bengali. Rural speech, in contrast, preserves clearer tonal contrasts and more conservative articulation patterns. Morphologically, both varieties retain the core agglutinative framework of Kokborok; however, urban speech shows signs of reduced overt marking and increased lexical borrowing. Syntactic differences are subtle but observable in clause simplification, international questioning, and code-mixed constructions. Lexically, the divergence is most pronounced, with urban speech exhibiting significant borrowing in administrative and modern domains, while rural speech maintains a richer set of traditional vocabulary.

These patterns collectively illustrate a process of dialect levelling centred around the urban variety, which increasingly functions as a prestige reference form. Although such evolution is a natural outcome of language contact and social mobility, it also raises concerns about the gradual erosion of conservative grammatical features preserved in rural communities. Generational variation further indicates that these changes are ongoing and socially conditioned rather than abrupt or structurally disruptive.

Importantly, the study does not advocate prescriptive standardization but emphasizes the need for careful documentation of dialect diversity within Kokborok. Recognizing internal variation is essential for informed curriculum design, balanced representation in educational materials, and sustained linguistic vitality. As Kokborok continues to expand its academic and institutional presence, a comprehensive

understanding of its evolving grammar will remain crucial for safeguarding both its structural integrity and cultural identity.

References

- Burling, R. (2003). The Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeastern India. In G. Thurgood & R. J. LaPolla (Eds.), *The Sino-Tibetan languages* (pp. 169–191). Routledge.

- Debbarma, K. N. (2014, March 19). *Kokborok dialectal thesaurus*. Directorate of Kokborok & Other Minority Languages, Government of Tripura.

- Dev Varma, N. C. (2010, December). *Prasanga Kokboroker Manya Bhasha*. Naba Chandana.

- Debbarma, P. (2004). *A descriptive grammar of Kokborok*. Tripura University Press.

- Kundu Choudhury, K. (1999). *Kokborok bhasha o sahitya*. Akshar Publication.

- Dev Varma, N. C. (2010). *Kokborok bhasha–sahityer krombikash*. Naba Chandana Publication.

- Debbarma, P. (2024). The evolution of Kokborok and its linguistic characteristics. *The Academic, 2*(9), 885–901.

- Debbarma, P. (2024). Kokborok language: Education, policy, and the digital age. *The Academic, 2*(10), 351–365.

- Jacquesson, F. (2008). *A Kokborok grammar*. Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission.

- Sarmah, P., & Wiltshire, C. R. (2010). A preliminary acoustic study of Mizo vowels and tones. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of India, 37*(3), 121–129.

- Tripura, T., & Suantak, K. (2023). Segmental phonemes in Tripura: A variety of Kokborok. *Vak Manthan: Indian Linguistic Studies, 11*(6), 108–197.

- Tripura Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tripura. (2024). *Kokborok language*. Directorate of Kokborok & Other Minority Languages.

- Van Bik, K. (2009). *Proto-Kuki-Chin: A reconstructed ancestor of the Kuki-Chin languages*. University of California, Berkeley.