



## A Study of Sudhanwa Debbarma's Literary Works

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### ABSTRACT

The Left Front government of Tripura honored Sudhanwa Debbarma, the first novelist in the Kokborok language of Tripura, for his literary contributions with the Rabindra Award. The history of literature in the Kokborok language is nearly a century old. This literary trend, which began with the legendary Radhamohan Thakur, has reached the modern era through a continuous process. Sudhanwa Debbarma is the finest writer in this tradition of Kokborok literature. His novel 'Hachuk Khurio' (In the Lap of the Hills) is the first published novel in Kokborok. This novel has made him immortal and has opened the doors to modern Kokborok literature. Following in his footsteps, Shyamlal Debbarma wrote the second Kokborok novel, Khong (Gandi).

### Literary works of Sudhanwa Debbarma:

Sudhanwa Debbarma was a pioneer not only in Kokborok literature but also in the publication of Kokborok literary magazines. Under his editorship, the mouthpiece of the Tripura Janashiksha movement, Kwtal Kothoma (New Story or the Story of a New Era), was published. In this regard, it should be mentioned in another context that although Kwtal Kothoma was short-lived (1954–1956), its impact was far-reaching, and it played the role of a navigator for the future of Kokborok literature. Many of the contemporary leaders of Tripura politics were associated with the magazine Kwtal Kothoma. Among them, Sudhanwa Debbarma and Aghore Debbarma were prominent. Other figures of that era, such as Congress President Manmohan Debbarma, and the singer and composer Mahendra Debbarma, were also associated with this magazine. In this context, what the editor of Kwtal Kothoma told me is worth mentioning: "Kwtal Kothoma was first published as a bimonthly. It was published continuously



from 1954 to 1957. Later, it became a quarterly and was then discontinued for three years." In this literary magazine, Sudhanwa Debbarma's first Kokborok novel, Chethuwang (The Chhatim Tree), began to be published. Although it is still waiting to be published in book form, it appeared in Kwtal Kothoma from the first issue. The languages used in the five issues of Kwtal Kothoma.

Now, let's briefly discuss the literary works of Sudhanwa Debbarma. One: Drama. Sudhanwa Debbarma made his debut in literature through play writing. His first play was Egiye Cholo (Move Forward). The play is bilingual—written in Kokborok and Bengali. In this play, Hindu money lenders and Muslim farmers speak in Bengali, while the attendants of Maharaja Bir Bikram speak in Kokborok. He wrote the play in 1948 while underground. The subject of this play is the Golaghati Peasant Rebellion. This rebellion occurred as part of a peasant movement against the exploitation by moneylenders and the oppression of the government administration. The leadership of the Janashiksha Samiti led this rebellion. In this play, it is shown how, towards the end, the Tripura Congress pushed the Janashiksha Samiti towards armed movement. The hero of the play is Rajen—Rajendra Debbarma. There are also several female characters in the play. In the drama, the police and government administration are portrayed as instruments of oppression. To counter the leadership of the movement, they were used as a force behind the scenes by the Congress leadership. Maharaja says, "The Janashiksha Samiti has become a poisonous snake. At the first opportunity, they will finish everyone. At that time, you and my party it won't last; in the end, you'll become a communist..."

The text in the image is a Bengali literary analysis of works by Sudhanwa Debbarma, focusing on his second play, Parikhit Bidroho, and his novel, Chethuwang.

Second Play: Parikhit Bidroho Sudhanwa Debbarma's second play is titled Parikhit Bidroho (The Parishing Rebellion). It was written entirely in the Kokborok language. The subject of this play is the rebellion of the Jamatia tribes against the Tripura monarchy. This rebellion took place during the mid-19th century. While imprisoned in Hazaribagh Jail, the author wrote this play as a Jatrappala (a traditional folk theater form). It became highly popular among the Jamatias, who performed it on many nights. However, the play has not yet been published in book form. According to the author, the original manuscript of this play is with Shri Subodh Ranjan Majumder, the head teacher of the Santirbazar High School in Agartala.

Two: Novel Many believe that Hachuk Khurio (In the Lap of the Mountains) is Sudhanwa Debbarma's first and last novel. However, it is known from the author's own words that a series titled Kwtal Kwtma



was published, which featured the serialized novel Chethuwang (The Chhatim Tree). Therefore, Hachuk Khurio is his second and last novel. The author has not yet started work on a third novel.

When Chethuwang was serialized in the Kokborok magazine Kwtal Kothoma, readers praised it highly. Hemanta Debbarma, one of the leaders of the Janashiksha movement, used to read this novel regularly and appreciated it greatly. This novel is based on the social and political life of Tripura's indigenous middle-class community. The story of Chethuwang begins before the era of the Janashiksha movement. The hero of the novel is Subrai and the heroine is Hemanti. In the original folk tale, the title is Chethuwang, but it is not the heroine's name. The author added this name while writing the novel. In the original folklore, a brother wants to marry his sister, but the sister refuses and eventually commits suicide by climbing a Chhatim (Chethuwang) tree. The author has kept this part of the folklore intact in his novel.

**Subject Matter of Chethuang:** The subject matter is as follows: Tripura's Maharaja was then Chhewngtunpha. Tufan Khan, a feudal lord under him, rebelled. He complained to the Nawab of Bengal against the Maharaja, and with the Nawab's help, the Nawab declared war on the King of Tripura. The Maharaja did not want to go to war and sought peace, but Queen Tripureshwari forced him into it. She herself joined the rebellion against Tufan Khan and led the march. Ultimately, Maharaja Chhewngtunpha was compelled to join, and the royal army emerged victorious.

The hero Nugurai and heroine Kormoti become involved in this war. Her grandfather arranged it for her, but the condition was to remove the thorns from a 'Khongorong' fruit. No one could fulfill this condition—meaning no one could remove the thorns. Then, for a test of strength... The text discusses the novel "Hachuk Khurio" (In the Lap of Mountains) by author Sudhanwa Debbarma. Here is a translation of the core sections:

**Plot Summary:** The novel's hero, Nugurai, failed to remove the thorns of the 'Khongorong' fruit but passed his strength test and won the hand of the beautiful Kormoti. However, war broke out against the Maharaja, and Nugurai and other young men left for battle. When Nugurai did not return, he was presumed dead, and Kormoti was pressured by her brother to remarry. To escape this social pressure and save her honor, Kormoti committed suicide by jumping from a Chatim tree. After many years, Nugurai returned to find his beloved gone and built a shelter under that same tree.

**Literary Significance:** "Hachuk Khurio" is Sudhanwa Debbarma's second novel, written in the Kokborok language. The novel is significant for its depiction of Kokborok culture and is considered one of the



finest novels written in Tripura. The author began writing this influential novel in 1962 while in Hazaribagh jail. It covers the transition of Tripuri society from the era of the Rajas to the present day.

The struggle for education among the hill tribes.

The conflict between the traditional hill life and the modernizing influence of the plains.

The "Janshiksha" (People's Education) movement.

The socio-economic shift from Jhum (shifting) cultivation to settled agriculture.

The novel is described as a "novel of transition," capturing the internal and external changes in tribal society, including the arrival of outsiders and the resulting shifts in social dynamics. has expanded. Although the socially conscious protagonist, Naren, initially leaned toward tribal movements, he later integrated himself into the mainstream and took the lead in solving tribal problems. Author Sudhanwa Debbarma has succeeded because those qualities reside within him. For this novel, he will remain immortal in Kokborok literature. It should be noted that the first volume of the novel Hachuk Khurio was adapted into a play by the author and published by the Tribal Language Cell of the Government of Tripura in 1996. Sudhanwa Debbarma translated Rabindranath's play Visarjan into Kokborok. I was startled when I read the manuscript of this translation. This translation is unique. Anyone reading this translation in Kokborok will become aware of the standard of this language. There is a backdrop to this translation work: during the birth centenary of Rabindranath, a committee was formed to translate his literary works into Kokborok. This committee included Jiten Thakur (Advisor Jiten Debbarma), Ajit Bandhu Debbarma, and author Sudhanwa Debbarma. It was then that the translation of Visarjan took place. It currently exists in an unpublished manuscript form.

Sudhanwa Debbarma's Poetry: Sudhanwa Debbarma has written few poems besides plays and novels. In May 1981, during the 'East India Culture and Solidarity Conference' held in Kolkata, at the request of Tripura's then Information Minister Shri Anil Sarkar and other famous writers of Kolkata, he wrote a poem in Kokborok. Its Bengali translation is given below:

### **Himadi (Walk)**

Walk, everyone, walk

A heavy burden on the head

Understand that time has no parents.

Those who are afraid die twice



Within this living and dying  
There is much to understand  
So I say walk, do not stop  
Move forward toward the west  
Do not be afraid.

Besides plays, novels, and poetry, Sudhanwa Debbarma has written many essays in Kokborok. These essays have been published in Lama and other Kokborok literary magazines. These essays are an asset to Kokborok literature.

Author Sudhanwa Debbarma is also a politician. He is the founding president of the Jana Shiksha Samiti. He was the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly in the first Left Front government of Tripura. Later, in the second Left Front government, he held a ministerial post. For his literary work in his mother tongue, Kokborok, he was honored with the Rabindra Puraskar by the Government of Tripura. He is a literary sun of our Tripura state; he is our pride. The Result of the Janshiksha Movement: Sudhanwa Debbarma's Novel Hachuk Khurio. The Janshiksha Movement and Hachuk Khurio

Just as the Ganamukti Parishad and the Communist Party would not have emerged among the indigenous people of Tripura without the Janshiksha Movement, Sudhanwa Debbarma's epic novel Hachuk Khurio would likely not have been written. Hachuk Khurio is the literary harvest of the movement—not just a literary achievement, but a grand harvest of a movement. The core ideology of the Janshiksha Movement finds its practical form in this novel. Those who did not witness the movement will find its calm yet determined social character reflected within these pages.

Toward the end of the Second World War, Kokborok-speaking educated youth in Tripura, inspired by India's independence struggle and the signs of the fall of the monarchy, raised the torch of mass education for the neglected people in the mountains. This was a people's war by unarmed mountain folk against armed feudal lords. Such a unified movement of indigenous people was unprecedented in the thirteen-hundred-year history of the Tripura kings. To lead the movement, the Janshiksha Samiti was formed on the 11th of Poush, 1354 (Bengali Era). Sudhanwa Debbarma, the great author of this novel, was its founding president. As an organizer of the movement, he traveled to the laps of the mountains where illiteracy, superstition, and feudal oppression prevailed. To organize this movement, the author faced royal wrath and was eventually arrested as a soldier of the Janshiksha Movement.



As a child of the mountains, Sudhanwa Debbarma knew the mountain people intimately, just as he knew the royal family of Agartala and their followers, the "Thakur" community. The elite upper-class indigenous society of Agartala held a profound contempt for the illiterate "Jhumia" (shifting cultivators) of the mountains. The enlightened youth of the mountains fought against this hatred by educating the people and challenging the dominance of the urban educated elite. The Janshiksha Samiti thus became involved in a direct conflict with the Agartala-centric Tripura Council led by the Thakurs.

The novel *Hachuk Khurio* begins with the expression of this hatred toward the mountain people. Instantly, the indigenous society of Tripura is divided into two: the mountains and the capital, Agartala. However, the pride of the urban Thakur family eventually bows before the fruits of the Janshiksha Movement. Naren (the novel's protagonist) was once insulted as a "Tipra" (a derogatory or dismissive term in this context) by the "Gopen Thakur" family. When that same Naren passes his M.B.B.S. and becomes a doctor, he receives a son-in-law's welcome in their home. Chandra Mallika becomes eager to marry her daughter Mita (the heroine) to Naren. This is where the mountains of Tripura triumphed, the false vanity of the Thakurs surrendered, and the victory of the Janshiksha Movement was achieved. *Jana-shiksha Movement - Kwtal Kothoma - Hachuk Khurio*

The Jana-shiksha movement, as per the real historical demands of its time, evolved through a political process and gave rise to a literary trend within the "Ganamukti Parishad." This trend centered around the literary magazine "Kwtal Kothoma" (New Word) and saw the birth of the novel "Hachuk Khurio" (Searching the Hills). Although "Kwtal Kothoma" first appeared in 1954 as the mouthpiece of the Jana-shiksha movement, its character was not purely literary; it also presented the political ideology of the Ganamukti Parishad in a literary wrap to curious readers. The founder-editor of "Kwtal Kothoma" was Sudhanwa Debbarma, the author of the novel "Hachuk Khurio." "Kwtal Kothoma" was a literary magazine published in "Kokborok," the mother tongue of Tripura's largest tribal group. Alongside Sudhanwa Debbarma, many people wrote in this magazine in the Kokborok language. Dasharath Debbarma, the pioneer of the Jana-shiksha movement, also wrote in it. His political column "Gandhi Koklam"—a discussion about Gandhi—appeared in the first and second issues of "Kwtal Kothoma"; "Chin Dshni Gathangto"—about the history of China—in the third issue etc.

The first Kokborok novel written by Sudhanwa Debbarma, "Hachuk Khurio," began appearing in serialized form from the third issue of "Kwtal Kothoma." However, this novel was not born specifically for the magazine. It was written while the author was in Hazaribagh Jail as an undertrial prisoner. At that time, Sudhanwa Debbarma, the founder-president of the Jana-shiksha movement, was not just a mass



leader but a leader of the Communist Party of Tripura. Therefore, the reflection of his political ideology is evident in "Hachuk Khurio." The novel's protagonist, Naren, starts as a nationalist activist in the Jana-shiksha movement but eventually joins the socialist movement. Thus, through the Jana-shiksha movement, the novel "Hachuk Khurio" ultimately transforms into a socialist movement.

The novel "Hachuk Khurio" captures the transition from monarchy to democracy and from shifting cultivation to settled farming in tribal life. During the era of feudalism, the Kings of Tripura were the supreme authorities for the tribal people. Although the Kings were not anti-people, they protected the tribal communities. Tribal heroes fought under the King's leadership. Remembering that proud history, the novel's hero Naren wonders, "The kings of Tripura once conquered Kamrup, Manipur, Arakan; the Mughal power could never destroy the independence of Tripura, so why is Tripura in such a wretched state today?"—Analyzing these questions, it becomes clear that even with respect for the declining feudalism, there was a lingering weakness. He asks with emotion, "The King is not just the owner of the kingdom, but also the owner of society. The King is the ruler as well as the guardian. But where was the gaze of Tripura's Kings? What did they leave for Tripura, for their society?"—Through this inner conflict, the novel expresses both respect for the monarchy and a call for emerging democracy, questioning the future role of tribal society. Thinking about his duties, he says— "However underdeveloped a tribe's identity may be, it has its own heritage and glorious tradition. Why can't that identity progress in its own way? Why must it take steps toward getting lost in the crowd? And to save it from getting lost, there was a need for a mass movement in tribal society—which can easily be called a revolutionary transition."

On the other hand, the protagonist of the novel cannot forget the dreamlike days of shifting Jhum cultivation. Therefore, the oldest character in the novel, Bhaktamani, says with a heavy heart— "Brother, those days are gone... the comfort of staying and eating in the old days is all gone today... those good days will never return, brother. You see, everything has become chaotic; every Jhum field now has different owners and different boundaries." Seeing the new mountains in the middle of the Jhum, the young girls' minds fill with melancholy; they feel restless as if steam is rising from boiling water—Eh-Hu-Hu. Calls from one hill are echoed from another. A young man sings from one Jhum, and a girl replies from another. This is how love begins. But in this transition, love for Jhum and the "Jhum-Kanya" (Jhum-maiden) cracks, and "Samatol Krishi" (plain-land farming) moves forward. Now, the tribal society is clinging to this farming to survive. Why the tribal society was forced to accept plain farming after thousands of years of Jhum culture is explained by old Bhaktamani— "Crops no longer grow in the Jhum as before; Goddess Lakshmi has left the hills for the plains. If we don't farm now, we won't eat. You see,



Dada, the old Jhum hills no longer yield crops. That's why we have to give up Jhum and come to the plains." But even in this new type of farming, land problems have appeared. Land scarcity has arisen. Refugees have occupied the plains of Tripura, and although they have taken the land, they are eyeing the Jhum hills. This is what the Jhumia (Jhum farmers) call the "Refugee Problem"—every place is filled with them, and there is no space left for even a goat to graze. No land will be found in this Tripura anymore. At the end of the novel, the protagonist joins the movement to resolve this land problem. And this was the social and political demand of that transition. Let the novel 'Hachuk Khurio' be successful because, on one hand, it shows feudalism and democracy, and on the other, it depicts the socio-political document of the tribal society of Tripura in the midst of Jhum and plain-land farming form of literature.

Socio-economic Portrait of Tribals in the Novel 'Hachuk Khurio' The story of the breaking and building of Tripura's tribal society is narrated in 'Hachuk Khurio'. It is clearly shown how the primitive communist tribal society based on Jhum is breaking down and how class division is emerging in the hills. This is happening through the painful birth of an underdeveloped capitalism. After the movement for mass education became a self-reliant economy... a self-sufficient nation is being built—this whole picture is found in 'Hachuk Khurio'. The village of Mwtai dongor Para, which is the setting of the novel, features Bhaktamani, Mangaal Sardar, and Gangacharan as middle-class farmers. The father of the novel's protagonist, Budhurai, is a poor farmer like the fire-victim Harajoi.

The land of the tribal people around the plains is being sold at cheap prices. On the other hand, a modern village is being built under the leadership of Naren. At this moment of the hill tribes' uprising against the plains people, their socio-economic stagnation is evident. Amidst these changes, a plot is being hatched for a confrontation between landless farmers and the court-broker Biramani. In the novel, a conflict between the landless farmers and the court-broker Biramani is prominently featured. Conversely, even within this instability, the son of a poor farmer, Naren, is leading the tribal community with the torch of public education, sometimes through nationalism and sometimes through overall social reform.

A comparative discussion of the socio-economic picture of the hills and that of the Thakur families of Agartala shows that they too were destitute at the end of the monarchy. There is a touch of reality in what happened to them after the monarchy ended and how they felt about it. Despite the background of luxury and the pride of royal lineage, those days are over. Yet, their feet did not want to touch the ground due to deep-seated arrogance. The hill tribes' neglect and hatred towards them stood in the way of their progress. The novel's protagonist, Naren, when he was working in the secret office of Agartala, first encountered these strange characters of the Thakur family. At the beginning of the novel, the character



Chandramallika is seen insulting Naren. Unable to bear the insult, Mita protests—"Say, Mother, don't you have even a little bit of affection? You make Naren do the marketing every day, and then you don't even hesitate to call him a 'low-born'? You give money, he shops. Let him do the marketing for a few days, Mother! Or rather, if you don't give him money, all your pride will vanish. Does Naren buy fish every day with money from his own pocket?"

Chandramallika is forced to acknowledge the grievance. But this grievance is actually quite true. The bitter reality of how they lived is reflected here—"Chandramallika does not know what it means to run a household with salt and watered rice. At the end of the month, they don't even have money to buy small fish; they have to pass the days somehow by eating simple rice with vermilion. At the beginning of the month, the marketing is good, then it starts to dwindle—the worry of how to finish the month is a constant death. Many people say a lot about their misery, but Chandramallika is one of them." Yet, these aristocratic families did not support the public education movement to change their plight; rather, they obstructed it. They formed a "Tripura Union" and took to the streets to protest. However, the movement for public education eventually liberated them from economic misery as well. From jobs in schools to clerical positions in offices, they also claimed their share—this was the "golden crop" of the public education movement.

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