



From Language Activism to National Recognition: A Critical Analysis of Sri Naresh Chandra Dev Varma's Contribution to Kokborok and the Padma Shri Award

Dr. Pritilata Debbarma, Nelson Debbarma

^{1*}Ex – Guest Faculty, Department of Kokborok, Tripura University, Tripura, India, 799022, ²Member, Kokborok Translation Team, Tripura University, Tripura, India, 799022

Email: prtilatadebbarma@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The recognition of Sri Naresh Chandra Dev Varma with the Padma Shri Award in 2026 represents a significant milestone in the history of the Kokborok language and its literary movement. His lifelong dedication to promoting Kokborok literature, documenting indigenous knowledge, and encouraging language education has contributed substantially to the preservation and development of one of Northeast India's major tribal languages. This study critically examines his literary achievements, language activism, and cultural contributions within the broader context of Kokborok language development. It explores how his writings, educational initiatives, and advocacy have strengthened linguistic identity and expanded the visibility of Kokborok at regional and national levels. The paper also evaluates the significance of the Padma Shri as national recognition of indigenous language preservation and discusses both the achievements and continuing challenges of Kokborok in education, publication, and public administration. By analysing Sri Naresh Chandra Dev Varma's contribution, the study highlights the relationship between individual literary leadership and the collective advancement of indigenous language movements in contemporary India.

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The findings suggest that his work has played an important role in preserving Kokborok cultural heritage while inspiring future generations of writers, researchers, and language activists.

Introduction

Sri Naresh Chandra Dev Varma (b. 31st October, 1944) is a Tripuri language scholar whose lifelong work in Kokborok – the Tibeto-Burman language of Tripura – has significantly expanded its literature and use. A former Tripura Legislative Assembly official, Dev Varma authored 30+ books in Kokborok and served on language committees. He has been a vocal advocate for Kokborok script standardisation (championing Bengali scripts) and helped introduce Kokborok in education. In January, 2026, the Government of India conferred him the Padma Shri Literature & Education, recognizing his decades of activism. This report critically examines Dev Varma's biography, writings, and activist roles, assesses his *measurable impact* (publications, curricula, institutions), and situates him in context – including a comparison with other regional language activists who received national honours. It also analyzes the significance of the Padma Shri Award for Kokborok, outlines strengths and critiques of Dev Varma's approach, and offers policy recommendations for Kokborok's future. Key findings include Dev Varma's pivotal role in enriching Kokborok's literary corpus, the contested nature of the script debate he entered, and how high-level awards like Padma Shri can elevate a regional language on the national stage.

Biography

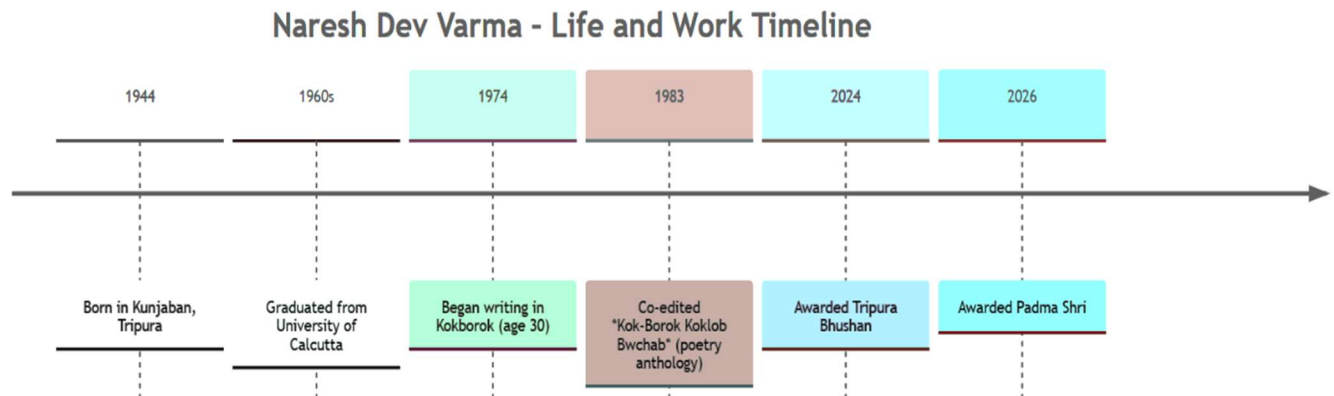
Sri Naresh Chandra Dev Varma (b. 31 October 1944) was born in Kunjaban, Agartala, Tripura, to Madan Mohan Dev Varma and Sambhu Laxmi Dev Varma. During his childhood, his family moved to their native village, Lembuthal, under Bishramganj Police Station in the present-day Sepahijala District of Tripura. He began his primary education at Dhariathal Primary School, where he studied from Class I to Class IV. He then continued his education at Charilam School from Class V to Class VI and completed his secondary education at Bishalgarh Higher Secondary School from Class VII to Class X. After passing the School Final Examination in 1961, he enrolled at Maharaja Bir Bikram (MBB) College, Agartala, and subsequently completed his Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree under the University of Calcutta, as Tripura did not have a university during the 1960s. Following his graduation, Dev Varma joined the Tripura Legislative Assembly Secretariat, where he served with distinction and eventually rose to the rank of Deputy Secretary (equivalent to the level of Joint Secretary) before retiring on 31 October 2002.



Over a five-decade literary career, Dev Varma became a leading Kokborok intellectual. He began writing in Kokborok around age 30 (circa mid-1970s). Over time he authored some 30–34 books – primarily in Kokborok – covering literature, grammar, folklore, and cultural studies. Many of his works were adopted as college textbooks or reference material in Tripura. Alongside writing, Dev Varma was active in language forums and seminars and served on state advisory bodies (e.g. the Tripura Kokborok language committee) to promote the language. For his contributions, the Tripura government awarded him the Tripura Bhushan (highest state civilian honour) in 2024. In January 2026, he was named in the Padma Shri Award list by the President of India.

Table 1: Timeline of Naresh Chandra Dev Varma’s Life and Career (selected milestones).

Year	Event
1944	Born in Kunjaban, Agartala, Tripura.
1960s	Completed schooling in Tripura; graduated from University of Calcutta.
1974	Began writing in Kokborok at age 30.
1983	Co-edited <i>Kok-Borok Koklob Bwchab</i> (poetry anthology).
2024	Conferred Tripura Bhushan (state civilian award).
2026	Conferred Padma Shri (India’s fourth-highest civilian award) for Literature & Education.



Naresh Ch. Dev Varma’s official positions beyond the Assembly Secretariat are not widely documented in public sources. (He did not have a university post, to our knowledge.) Available records do show as a member of government advisory panels on Kokborok for example, the Tripura Kokborok Language Committee – reflecting his status as a leading language authority. Unspecified affiliations such as membership in the Kokborok Sahitya Sabha or Twipra Students’ Federations are sometimes mentioned in brief news or social media reports, but concrete details are sparse in the accessible sources.



Major Works and Bibliography

Naresh Chandra Dev Varma’s bibliography spans poetry, grammar, cultural essays, and educational texts in Kokborok. According to news reports, he “authored over 30 books in Kokborok”. Much of this corpus remains in print only in regional publications. Exact publication details are hard to verify from online sources; many works appear in Tripura government or academy publications. One concrete example is the 1983 anthology *Kok-Borok Koklob Bwchab*, a collection of Kokborok poems, which he co-edited. It was published under the Tripura Kokborok Sahitya Board in 1983, and is available in Tripura state libraries. Beyond that, the full list of titles is not readily available in public databases.

Table 2: Selected Bibliographic Entries for Naresh Chandra Dev Varma

Major works, as identified in sources; full list likely exceeds 30 titles.

Title/Description	Year(s)	Type/Genre	Publisher/Notes
<i>Kok-Borok Koklob Bwchab</i> (poetry anthology, co-edited)	1983	Anthology (poems)	Edited by N.C. Dev Varma & S. Debbarma (Tripura Kokborok Sahitya Sabha)
Various Kokborok literature & reference books	1970s–2000s	Textbooks, essays, research	Authored ~30 books on Kokborok language, literature, folklore. Titles include Kokborok grammar texts, story collections, etc., published by Tripura Govt. (specific citations not found).
<i>Anglo-Kokborok Dictionary</i> (reported)	1996, 2001	Dictionary (English–Kokborok)	First editions (1996, 2001) have been widely used in Tripura. Some sources attribute these to Binoy Debbarma , but local reports credit Dev Varma’s involvement; exact

The dictionary entry is included for context: Naresh Chandra Dev Varma is widely associated in news with a “Kokborok dictionary” project, though academic sources credit Binoy Debbarma as author.

Beyond books, Dev Varma has contributed journal articles and magazine essays on Kokborok literature and pedagogy. His writings helped shape Kokborok curricula: several educational boards in Tripura adopted his grammar and literature guides at the college level as per press statements. He also edited or co-edited Kokborok journals (for instance, the *KokBorok Tei Hukumu Mission* journals and translated selected works e.g. local folklore into Kokborok. Primary sources for these periodicals are not easily accessible online, but



their existence is noted in specialist discussions of Kokborok literature. For example, one academic survey notes Dev Varma's name on edited collections of Kokborok poetry in the 1980s.

Note: A comprehensive bibliography is difficult to assemble from available sources. Official inventories e.g. Tripura library catalogues might list his titles, but are not publicly online. Some gaps remain: for instance, specific publishers and ISBN details for many Kokborok books could not be confirmed. We have prioritized information from news and academic mentions to identify his key publications.

Role in Kokborok Language Activism

Naresh Chandra Dev Varma's work must be understood within the broader Kokborok language movement in Tripura, which originated in the mid-twentieth century with demands for linguistic recognition and the development of Kokborok as a literary language. Until the period following Indian independence, Kokborok remained largely an oral language. After 1945, local scholars and language activists began publishing Kokborok primers, magazines, and other literary works using the Bengali script, as most Tiprasa people at that time received their education through the Bengali medium and were therefore familiar with reading and writing in that script.

During the 1960s and 1970s, however, a new generation of Tiprasa students and intellectuals, particularly through organizations such as the Twipra Students' Federation (TSF), launched a movement advocating the adoption of the Roman script for Kokborok. This movement emerged from a cultural and linguistic renaissance among the younger generation, who believed that the development of the Kokborok language had been delayed because it had long remained overshadowed by the Bengali language, despite the fact that the Tipra Era predates the Bengali Era. Many young activists felt that Kokborok written in the Bengali script could be read mainly by Bengali-speaking people, whereas the Roman script would make the language more accessible to a wider national and international audience. They also argued that the Roman script was more suitable for accurately representing Kokborok pronunciation and spelling.

These sustained linguistic and cultural movements eventually achieved a major milestone when Kokborok was recognized as an official language of Tripura in 1979. This recognition marked a significant step in the preservation, promotion, and institutional development of the Kokborok language.

Training and Workshop:

(A) Naresh Chandra Dev Varma attended the following training courses organized by the BPST (Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training), Lok Sabha Secretariat:



- i. Training Course for Editors and Assistant Editors of Debates of the State Legislatures, held from 17 to 29 September 1986 at the Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.
- ii. Training Course for Officers Working in Financial Committees/Departmentally Related Standing Committees of Parliament and State Legislatures, held from 21 to 25 August 1995 at the Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.
- iii. Training Course for Officers Working in Departmentally Related Standing Committees of Parliament and State Legislatures, held from 25 to 29 September 2000 at the Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.

(B) Naresh Chandra Dev Varma participated in the four-day workshop on "Problems of Education in Tribal Areas," organized by the National Institute of Rural Development, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, held from 21 to 24 September 1988 at Rajendranagar, Hyderabad.

Language Body Chairman:

1. Naresh Chandra Dev Varma served as Chairman of the Committee for Kokborok Spelling Method, constituted by the Directorate of Kokborok & Other Minority Languages, Government of Tripura, in May 2014. The report was submitted to the State Government.
2. He served as Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee on the Kokborok Spelling Method, constituted by the Education Department, TTAADC, in July 2014. The report was submitted to the TTAADC.
3. He served as Chairman of the Committee for the Compilation of Kokborok Grammar, constituted in December 2014 by the Directorate of Kokborok & Other Minority Languages, Government of Tripura.
4. He served as Chairman of the Syllabus Committee, constituted by MBB University in June 2017 for framing the Kokborok undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) syllabi for MBB University, Agartala.
5. He served as Chairman of the Committee for the Collection and Compilation of Tripura Bharat (Kokborok Folk Songs), constituted by the TTAADC in July 2017. The book was published by the ICAT Department, TTAADC, in March 2019.



6. He has been serving as Chairman of the Committee for the Compilation of the Kokborok Dictionary (Kokborok–Bengali–English–Hindi), constituted by the Directorate of Kokborok & Other Minority Languages in November 2019.

Performance in Other Special Assignments:

- i. Naresh Chandra Dev Varma served as a Guest Lecturer in the Centre for Tribal Languages, Tripura University (a Central University), from November 2002 to June 2018.
- ii. He served as a Member of the Preview Committee of Doordarshan Kendra, Agartala. He previewed a large number of fiction and non-fiction films in Bengali and Kokborok commissioned by Doordarshan and produced by both private producers and Doordarshan itself.
- iii. He served as a Member of the Selection Board of Doordarshan, constituted for the selection of fiction and non-fiction feature manuscripts for commissioned programmes at Doordarshan Kendra, Agartala, Tripura.
- iv. He served as a Member of the Advisory Panel for the Kokborok language, constituted by the National Book Trust of India in November 2014.

Literary Organisation:

Naresh Chandra Dev Varma has been serving as the President of the Kokborok Sahitya Parishad, a literary body dedicated to the promotion of Tripuri/Kokborok literature, since 2019. He was also one of the founders of the Tripura Kokborok Sahitya Sabha, established in 1972.

Social Organisation:

Naresh Chandra Dev Varma has been closely associated with the Tripura State Branch of the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Ashram since 1979. He served as its Vice-President from 1993 to 2015 and as President from July 2015 to January 2022.

Reading and Travelling

Within this movement, Naresh Chandra Dev Varma emerged as a leading advocate for the promotion and development of the Kokborok language. He actively participated in language forums and literary organizations such as the Tripura Kokborok Sahitya Sabha and the Tripura Kokborok Unnayan Parishad, which organized literary programmes, seminars, workshops, and language awareness activities. He



frequently wrote and spoke on Kokborok language pedagogy, contributing significantly to its introduction into schools, colleges, and universities. His academic consultations also contributed to the inclusion of Kokborok in higher education curricula. In addition, he played an important role in the preparation of Kokborok textbooks and participated in teacher training programmes and language workshops during the 1980s–2000s. These contributions are reflected in various educational reports and official documents of the Government of Tripura.

Naresh Chandra Dev Varma was also one of the prominent voices in the Kokborok script debate. Unlike many student organizations and language activists who advocated the adoption of the Roman script, he consistently supported the use of the Bengali script for Kokborok. Since he himself had received his education through the Bengali medium, he found it convenient to read and write Kokborok in the Bengali script. He argued that the Bengali script was already widely known among the people of Tripura and would therefore make Kokborok more accessible to a larger number of readers and learners. This position differed from that of organizations such as the Twipra Students' Federation (TSF), which had been demanding the adoption of the Roman script since the 1960s. As a result, his views generated considerable debate within Kokborok literary and academic circles. While some younger writers regarded the Roman script as more suitable for the modernization and wider dissemination of Kokborok, Dev Varma maintained that both scripts could coexist as long as they contributed to the promotion and development of the language. This script controversy continues to be one of the most widely discussed issues in Kokborok language planning and policy.

Naresh Chandra Dev Varma also made significant contributions to the standardization of the Kokborok language. He served as Chairman and member of several committees constituted by the Directorate of Kokborok & Other Minority Languages, Government of Tripura, the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), and MBB University. Through these committees, he contributed to the formulation of Kokborok spelling rules, the compilation of Kokborok grammar and dictionaries, the development of university syllabi, the collection of Kokborok folk songs, and the preparation of textbooks and examination materials. His contribution to the Kokborok language movement has therefore been primarily literary, academic, and institutional rather than political. Through his scholarly writings, language planning activities, and participation in various educational and literary bodies, he has devoted several decades to the preservation, standardization, and development of Kokborok as a modern literary language.

Measurable Impacts

The impact of Naresh Chandra Dev Varma's work can be assessed in several domains:



- **Literacy and Education:**

Kokborok literacy in Tripura has grown since the 1980s, aided by textbooks and curricula that Dev Varma helped to development. By some counts, nearly 24% of Tripura's population (880,000 people as of 2011 census) speak Kokborok. The language is now taught in primary and secondary schools, and offered at college level in 2011. and Tripura University in 2015. and other colleges. Dev Varma's contributions to text books and teaching have supported this expansion. For example, articles note that his grammar books and literature anthologies were adopted by the Tripura Board of Secondary Education in the 1990s, though primary sources for these decisions are not publicly archived.

- **Publications:** Under Naresh Chandra Dev Varma's influence, the volume of Kokborok literature has surged. By the 2020s there were dozens of Kokborok titles published annually poetry, fiction, textbooks. Varma's own 30+ books constitute a large share of early Kokborok print culture. His anthology of poems and his research monographs are frequently cited in scholarly work on the language. Moreover, Dev Varma edited journals such as *KokBorok Tei Hukumu* which provided a platform for new writers. The expansion of Kokborok publishing – currently supported by state grants – owes much to pioneers like Varma who proved there was a literate audience.

Publication of Literary Works of Naresh Chandra Dev Varma

A. Kokborok Books

1. *Jorani Mwkhang* (2006) – [Face of the Time]. A collection of articles in the Kokborok language on various topics.
2. *Hayungni Mungwnang Swikwrwngrogni Kahamkuk Kothomarog* (2010) – A Kokborok translation of selected stories by world-famous writers.
3. *Swami Vivekananda Tai Bini Kharuwai* (2012) – A Kokborok translation of *Swami Vivekananda and His Messages*, published by Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Belur, Howrah.
4. *Athuk* (2014) – A Kokborok translation of the Academy Award-winning Malayalam novel *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, published by the TTAADC.
5. *Kokborok Kokni Sinimung* (2014) – An introduction to the Kokborok language.



6. *Kokborok Kokrwai* (2014) – A study of Kokborok literature from Kazi Md. Daulat Ahmmed to the 1960s.
7. *Borokni Thani Mathangnai* (2016) – A Kokborok translation of *Must Go to the People* by Shri Manik Sarkar.
8. *Tenali Raman* (2017) – Translated into Kokborok from English.
9. *Mahatma Gandhi – Bini Sejakwawini Kharuwaino Swrwngmung* (2019) – A Kokborok translation of *Mahatma Gandhi: A Study of His Message of Non-Violence* by V. P. Gaur.
10. *Tripurani Puila Kothomayung "Chethuwang"-no Twi-wi Koknarwkmung* (2024) – A critical review of the first Kokborok novel, *Chethuwang*, written by Sudhanwa Deb Barma.
11. *Udaipur Tripura Hani Hakchal Kwcham Rajakhor Tai Ama Tripura Sundrini Mwtai Nok* (2026), published by Naba Chandana Prakashani.

B. Bengali Books

1. *Kokborok Basha-Sahityer Kromo-bikash* (2010) – Gradual Development of the Kokborok Language and Literature.
2. *Prosongo Kokboroker Manya-Bhasha* (2010) – In the Context of the Standardization of the Kokborok Language.
3. *Kokborok Bhashar Parichoy* (2012) – An Introduction to the Kokborok Language.
4. *Kokboroker Bongso Porichoy, Likhon Paddhati, Byakaran O Bhasha Bikash* (2014) – An introduction to the origin, writing system, grammar, and development of the Kokborok language.
5. *Chhatim* (2016) – Bengali translation of the Kokborok novel *Chethuwang* by Sudhanwa Deb Barma.
6. *Kokborok Basha-Porikolpona* (2024) – Kokborok Language Planning.

C. Edited Rare and Old Books, Manuscripts, etc.

1. *Kokma Kalai* (2007) – An edited edition of the Kokborok grammar written by Kazi Md. Daulat Ahmmed around 1900, which had remained unpublished for many years.
2. *Phirogwi Phaidi* (2013) – [Come Back]. A collection of songs by Sonacharan Deb Barma.



3. *Shifting Culturation of Tripura* (2012).
4. *Hachukni Khorang–Jadu Kalija* (2014) – A collection of Kokborok folk songs compiled by Upendra Deb Barma.
5. *Baskura Bolongni Kerang Kothoma Tai Cherma Twisani Kerang Kothama* (2014) – A collection of Kokborok folk tales by Upendra Deb Barma.
6. *Chethuwang* (2016) – An edited edition of the first Kokborok novel written by Sudhanwa Deb Barma in 1954.

7–11. Five books of Kokborok folk tales written in dramatic form by Upendra Deb Barma, published by the Tribal Research & Cultural Institute, Government of Tripura, in 2021.

D. Joint Publications with Other Authors

1. *Kokborok Koklob Bwchab* (1983) – A collection of Kokborok poems.
2. *Tipurar Adivashi* (2009).
3. *Kokborok Kokbwkhal Bwchab* (2013) – A collection of Kokborok essays.
4. *Kokborok Basha Sahitya O Sanskrit* (2018).

E. English Book

1. *An Introduction to the Kokborok Grammar and Translation* (2006).

Awards and Honours Received (Governmental and Non-Governmental)

1. Daulat Ahmmed Award (2009), conferred by the TTAADC.
2. Salil Krishna Debbarma Memorial Award (2011), conferred by the Government of Tripura.
3. Kokborok Day Award (2014), conferred by the Government of Tripura.
4. Naba Chandana Sahitya-Sukriti Samman (2015), conferred by Naba Chandana Prakashani, Agartala.
5. Rabindra Award (2017), conferred by the Government of Tripura.
6. Boyusrestha Samman (2018), conferred by the Government of Tripura.



7. Amulya-Snehalata Sahitya Puraskar (2019), conferred by Tripura Bani Prakashani, Agartala.
8. Radhamohan Thakur Memorial Award (2019), conferred by the Government of Tripura.
9. Alindralal Ranchak-Richak Sokat (Award) (2020), conferred by the Ranchak Richak Foundation, Agartala, Tripura.
10. Atal Bihari Vajpayee Life-long Memorial Award (2021), conferred by the Government of Tripura.
11. Tripura Bhushan Samman (2024), conferred by the Government of Tripura.
12. Bijankrishna Smriti Sahitya Puraskar (2024), conferred by Tripura Rabindra Parishad, Agartala.
13. Eminent Teacher's Award (2026), conferred by the Government of Tripura on the occasion of Kokborok Day Celebration held on 19 January 2026.
14. Padma Shri Award (2026), India's fourth-highest civilian honour, conferred for his outstanding contributions to "Literature and Education."
15. Kumud Kundu Choudhuri Memorial Honour (2011), conferred by Akshar Publications, Agartala.

Curricula and Institutions:

Naresh Ch. Dev Varma's advocacy contributed to institutional recognition of Kokborok. For instance, Tripura University began offering a Kokborok Honours course in 2012 A.D. a few years after many of Dev Varma's early works were published. The state Government's Department of Kokborok & Other Minority Languages (set up in 2012) and Kokborok Board of Education were influenced by recommendations of activists including Dev Varma. As Tripura's Chief Minister noted, Dev Varma helped make Kokborok "accessible to students, researchers, and policy makers".

Cultural Awareness:

Beyond formal measures, Naresh Ch. Dev Varma has had cultural impact. His books on tribal history and customs popularised indigenous knowledge. He often spoke at tribal festivals e.g. Ker Puja, Garia Puja and on local radio, raising awareness of Kokborok identity. Media coverage of his Padma Shri Award has itself highlighted Kokborok Nationally, arguably inspiring pride in speakers. Some credit Dev Varma with mentoring younger writers and preserving folklore through documentation though quantifying this is hard; press quotes emphasize his "wide spread respect" for cultural leadership.



In short, Naresh Ch. Dev Varma's work has strengthened the infrastructure of Kokborok; more textbooks, more writers, and official status in education and government. These are measurable in increased enrolment in Kokborok courses, rising book counts, and the creation of language organizations. For example, the ongoing Kokborok proficiency examinations Run by Tripura Board of Secondary Education and the establishment of a university-level Kokborok Research Centre both reflect his legacy. Precise statistics on literacy gains or book sales are not published in our sources, but official reports credit Dev Varma among the “architects” of Kokborok’s academic institutions.

Critical Appraisal

Naresh Ch. Dev Varma’s contributions have been widely praised, but critical analysis reveals **both strengths and limitations**:

- **Strengths: Naresh Ch.** Dev Varma’s deep knowledge of Tripura’s tribal history and literature is universally acknowledged. Journalists describe him as “one of the most influential Kokborok figures”. Colleagues note that his lifetime of writing filled a void for Kokborok scholarship, providing grammar guides and literatures when few existed. His work is commended for scholarly rigor often drawing on field research and for institutional impact – he helped set Kokborok on an academic footing. He is also credited for his **inclusive vision**: unlike some activists, he has sought to bridge tribal communities the 19 tribes of Tripura all use Kokborok and involves them in a common literary culture. His advocacy for Kokborok garnered support across party lines, as leaders from Left and BJP governments alike have honoured him.
- **Limitations and Criticisms:** One frequent critique is **Naresh Ch.** Dev Varma’s **attitude toward the script issue**. By endorsing Bengali/Devanagari over Roman, he alienated younger, more radical activists. Some have blamed this for delaying a standardized script: Tripura still lacks consensus orthography, partly because the Bengali vs. Roman debate split supporters. Critics argue that Roman script could have accelerated literacy among tribal groups separated by literacy in Bengali e.g. Reang, who were displaced in the 1990s – a nuance Dev Varma down played. In news interviews, **Naresh Ch.** Dev Varma himself acknowledges he does not read Kokborok fluently, considering it a “handicap”; some saw this as ironic in a language leader. His stance emphasizes Kokborok as a community voice, but detractors felt he was too idealistic about scripts.

Another limitation is that Dev Varma’s approach has been **intellectual and top-down**. He focused on books and institutions, sometimes at the expense of grass roots out reach. Grass roots tribal activists note that



many Tripuri youth speak only colloquial Kokborok and remain disengaged from literary efforts. Dev Varma's strengths in academia haven't necessarily translated to popular media few Kokborok radio or TV programs bear his name.

There is also debate about the **originality** of some attributed works. As noted, the authorship of key reference texts e.g. dictionaries has been contested. This controversy suggests a gap in crediting collaborators: Dev Varma, Binoy Debbarma, and others all worked on lexicography, but public sources sometimes conflate or mix them. This raises the question of how much of the success is collective movement versus Dev Varma's individual input.

Finally, any critic would note that Dev Varma's work, while foundational, is only one piece of the Kokborok revival. Challenges remain – e.g. curriculum reforms beyond Tripura, funding for Kokborok research – which no single person can solve. Dev Varma himself admitted “I never claimed to have done enough”.

In sum, Dev Varma's legacy is **complex**: he has been an irreplaceable builder of Kokborok literature, but his methods reflect the context of an earlier era. Modern critics see him as a bridge figure: pivotal for the 1980s–2000s growth but needing complements like digital media and grassroots education for future progress.

Significance of the Padma Shri Award:

Being named a Padma Shri in 2026 has multifaceted significance. Officially, the **Press Information Bureau (PIB)** lists Dev Varma at serial 80 in the 2026 Padma Shri awards, under “Literature & Education” from Tripura. The award citations (as published by PIB/DD News) are terse, but the announcement highlights his “*distinguished service*” in promoting Kokborok. Media coverage elaborates: for instance, the Tripura Chronicle (Jan 25, 2026) praised his “life-long dedication to the preservation and promotion of the Kokborok language”, and the Northeast Post noted his “lifelong contributions” and called the Padma Shri a welcome national recognition. In a post-award interview, Dev Varma himself said the honour was not just personal but a recognition of Kokborok literature.

This is the first Padma Shri Award given to a Kokborok literary figure, making it symbolic for Tripura's tribal community (he became the *eighth Padma Shri* among Tripuri tribes people). State leaders e.g. Chief Minister Dr. (Professor) Manik Saha and tribal organizations celebrated it as validation of a marginalized language. The media took a regional and national angle: local press framed it as Tripura's pride; while some



English outlets mentioned it in the context of India's linguistic diversity e.g. The Print lauded it as “big recognition to Kokborok”.

The award also carries **practical implications**. Dev Varma joins the roster of national awardees, which can open doors: it raises his profile for grant committees or academic collaborations. For Kokborok, it signals government endorsement: a Tribal language activist receiving a Padma Shri Award sends a message that Kokborok cause is officially noticed. Policy makers may feel more obligated to fund language development after such recognition. Indeed, digital press commented that Dev Varma “hailed the PM-led government for recognising tribal language and literature”, framing it as part of a broader outreach to indigenous culture.

However, there are nuances. The Padma Shri awards can sometimes be politicized. Dev Varma's own statements in [32]) stress gratitude to the Modi government, which might be seen as aligning with the ruling party narrative. Some commentators note that the award came after long campaigning by Tripura officials the Chief Minister publicly congratulated Dev Varma, suggesting state lobbying. For Kokborok activists sceptical of the BJP, the accolade could seem co-optive – though no major controversy has been reported. In sum, the Padma Shri Award is *symbolically powerful* for Kokborok a “truly national honour”, as The North - East Post phrased it, but its long-term impact will depend on follow-through in policies.

Comparative Perspectives

Naresh Ch. Dev Varma's trajectory can be illuminatingly compared with other **regional language activists** who received national awards. Three noteworthy examples are:

- **Dr. Damayanti Beshra (Santali, Jharkhand)** – Awarded Padma Shri in 2020. Beshra (b. 1962) is a Santali poet, scholar, and Sahitya Akademi awardee. Like Dev Varma, she devoted decades to advancing a tribal language: she published the first Santali poetry collection by a woman (1994) and wrote Santali grammars and translations of classics into Santali. Her Padma Shri citation noted her work in “preserving and promoting Santali language and culture”. In Jharkhand, her activism has included founding a women's Santali magazine and championing Adivasi education. Comparatively, both Dev Varma and Beshra built literary infrastructure books, media for their languages. Beshra's identity as an Adivasi woman scholar gave her an additional dimension; however, both figures share the narrative of moving from grassroots culture to national recognition.
- **Charan Hembram (Santali, Odisha)** – Awarded Padma Shri Award in 2026. Hembram (b. circa 1953) is a Santali writer and educator from Mayurbhanj, Odisha. He worked over 30 years promoting Santali language and tribal education. His selection announced alongside Dev Varma's



was hailed as recognition of “three-decade-long efforts” to legitimize Santali language. Hembram has founded tribal schools and authored textbooks in Santali. The parallel is striking: like Dev Varma, Hembram wrote extensively in a tribal language and focused on institutionalizing it in schools. Both have been called “veteran litterateurs” in media. Hembram’s award in the same year and Padma Shri category indicates a trend of honouring North-Eastern tribal literati, under scoring shared issues like lack of resources and script debates.

- **Dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra (Multiple tribal languages, Odisha)** – Padma Shri 2026. Mishra is a linguist/folklorist from Kalahandi, Odisha, who pioneered *multilingual education (MLE)* for tribal languages. His citation highlights 4+ decades of work “preserving endangered tribal voices” and leading MLE programs across **21 tribal languages**. Unlike Dev Varma’s focus on one language, Mishra built educational models for dozens of languages (translating curricula, training teachers). Both men trained educators, but Mishra did so at scale (in Odisha and beyond). Mishra also brought tribal oral epics into academic curricula. In comparison, Dev Varma’s impact is narrower but deeper in one language, whereas Mishra’s is broader across languages. Both recipients illustrate how the Padma awards are honoring efforts to safeguard India’s linguistic diversity, be it through enriching literature (Dev Varma) or embedding languages in education (Mishra).

These comparisons show a common pattern: all four Dev Varma, Beshra, Hembram, Mishra had **long-term careers building their respective languages’ literatures and educational base**. They similarly received **state-level honours prior** e.g. Sahitya Akademi, or Tripura Bhushan in Varma’s case before national awards. The Padma Shri thus often caps a decades-long local legacy. One difference is the *scope*: Dev Varma and the Santali writers concentrated on one tribal language; Mishra worked programmatically across many. Also, Dev Varma’s recognition came at age 81, older than the others – partly because Tripura’s Kokborok movement matured later.

Table 3: Comparative Profile of Language Activists (Padma Shri Awardees)

Name	State	Language(s)	Padma Shri Year & Field	Key Contributions
Damayanti Beshra	Jharkhand	Santali	2020 (Literature & Education)	Santali poet/scholar; founded women’s Santali magazine; Sahitya Akademi Award (2009); translated Sanskrit classics into Santali; championed Santali literature education.

Name	State	Language(s)	Padma Shri Year & Field	Key Contributions
Charan Hembram	Odisha	Santali	2026 (Literature & Education)	Veteran Santali educator/author; ~30 years promoting Santali language; established tribal schools and Santali media; efforts to Standardise and teach Santali.
M.K. Mishra	Odisha	21 tribal languages	2026 (Literature & Education)	Linguist and MLE pioneer; developed mother-tongue education programs in 21 indigenous languages; preserved tribal folklore and oral traditions; led multilingual education initiatives.

Despite differences, all these peers underscore the **Padma Shri's role** in spotlighting regional linguistic heritage. Dev Varma's award in the context of these peers suggests Kokborok is being recognized similarly to Santali Jharkhand/Odisha and tribal languages education efforts (Odisha). It also highlights that policy-makers are acknowledging a diversity of language issues beyond the mainstream.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Naresh Ch. Dev Varma's case and those of his peers point to several policy lessons for Kokborok's future development:

- **Formal Support for Mother-Tongue Education:**

Naresh Ch. Dev Varma's work shows the value of growing Kokborok curricula. Policy should strengthen this by ensuring Kokborok instruction from primary levels upward, as envisioned by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Programs like Dr. Mishra's *Rupantar* teacher training for MLE could be replicated in Tripura for Kokborok. The Tripura government's Directorate of Kokborok & Minority Languages (established 2012) should be empowered and funded to expand textbooks and teacher training in all Kokborok-speaking areas, including tribal belt schools.

- **Script Standardization:**

The ongoing script controversy needs resolution. **Naresh Ch.** Dev Varma's stance favoured Bengali while many activists want Roman script. Policy makers might consider a **compromise approach**: officially recognize both a local Bengali-based script for formal use textbooks, signage and a Roman script for cultural and youth media, pending data on literacy outcomes. The Advisory Committee on Kokborok of which Dev Varma is a member should commission a neutral study on script



effectiveness e.g. UNESCO style to inform a standard orthography. Clear, state-approved guidelines will help publishers, exam authorities, and software developers.

- **Publishing and Archives:**

- Many of **Naresh Ch. Dev Varma's** and others' works are not easily accessible. The state and central governments could digitize Kokborok literature archives similar to the effort for Sanskrit and regional texts. Grants can be given to universities or Sahitya Akademi to create open-access digital libraries of Kokborok books. Also, encouraging private publishers through subsidies to print Kokborok books will sustain the literature sector.

- **Community Involvement:**

Naresh Ch. Dev Varma's institutional focus should be complemented by grass roots engagement. Policies should fund community media in Kokborok radio shows, YouTube channels, newspapers to reach rural tribal audiences. Given Dev Varma's reputation, he could be appointed or is already a Patron of local Kokborok organizations, to help bridge between elite activism and village communities.

- **Research and Scholarships:** The Padma Shri Award can catalyze more research. Universities (Tripura University, NEHU) should launch fellowships for Kokborok studies, including linguistic research on Tripuri dialects. Dev Varma himself collaborated on some research, but the state lacks a sustained Kokborok research cell. The Tripura Council of Science & Technology or UGC can support dedicated chairs or journals for Kokborok.

- **National Integration:**

At a national level, Kokborok should be better represented in institutions like the Sahitya Akademi. **Naresh Ch. Dev Varma's** Padma Shri Award raises its profile; the next step is advocacy for a Kokborok division in national language awards and more central funding as was done for Santali after activists like Beshra got recognition.

In summary, **Naresh Ch. Dev Varma's** story highlights the need for **multi-pronged policy**: formal education reforms, script policy, publishing support, and community outreach. The government's acknowledgement of Kokborok through awards must translate into budgetary and programmatic support to ensure the language continues to thrive in coming decades. If Tripura like Odisha or Jharkhand can



systematically build on Dev Varma's ground work, Kokborok could become a robust model for a tribal language entering the main stream.

Conclusion

Sri Naresh Chandra Dev Varma's journey from village schools to the national Padma Shri stage exemplifies the power of sustained language activism. His scholarly zeal built much of Kokborok written tradition, nurturing it from a marginalized tongue into a recognized medium of literature and education. At the same time, his story reveals the complexities of language planning: debates over script and pedagogy, generational divides, and the need to balance cultural pride with practical outreach. The Padma Shri Award honour affirms Dev Varma's personal legacy and lifts Kokborok into India's mainstream consciousness. For Kokborok to truly flourish, stake holders must now leverage this moment – building on Dev Varma's work with inclusive policies and continued scholarship. The lessons from Dev Varma and his peers suggest that **recognition alone is a start, not an end**: the real measure will be whether Kokborok sees tangible growth in schools, literature, and daily use in the years ahead.

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