The Minority Languages of Tripura with Special Reference to Kokborok Language: A Study on the Language Demography of Tripura, India

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Abstract: Linguistically, Tripura is a case of one dominant language and several minority languages. This study aims to identify the minority languages endemic to Tripura, with the objective of preserving and protecting the identified languages. The present study is based on the secondary data collected from the Census of India, 2011 and Ethnologue, 2024. The descriptive research method has been used to analyse the data. The study reveals that eight minority languages are enlisted by the Directorate of Kokborok and Other Minority Languages in Tripura. The eight languages are Kokborok, Manipuri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Kuki-Mizo, Garo, Halam, Chakma and Mogh. Out of the eight minority languages enlisted by the said directorate of Tripura, Kokborok is the only language endemic to Tripura, and other minority languages have their language core areas outside the state. The core area of Kokborok is situated in Tripura, and the periphery areas are spread in the adjacent Indian states of Mizoram and Assam and Chittagong hill tracts of Bangladesh. However, the Kokborok language is a vulnerable minority language in its core area. The language speakers account for only 25.9 per cent of the total speakers in Tripura. Even after gaining official status on January 19, 1979, the Kokborok language is not widely used in educational institutions, official circulars, press, television, courts, and financial or social institutions, weakening language vitality. Therefore, considering the endemic character of the Kokborok language, meaning that the Kokborok language holds unique traits and adaptations to environmental conditions in the region, its minority status and low language vitality, the Kokborok language needs to be preserved and protected.

Keywords: Kokborok Language, Minority Language, Endemic Language, Language Demographics, Language Dominance, Majority Language.

1. Introduction

The minority languages all over the world are overwhelmed by the presence of the dominant languages. Many languages of the minority communities of Tripura state of India do not enjoy official recognition, nor is it widely used in the administrative, educational and commercial spaces. Out of the 121 languages identified by the Census of India, 2011 at the country level, 99 languages are present in Tripura. Bengali language, with 65.7 per cent speakers, is the most dominant language of the state. The remaining languages spoken by the smaller population groups comprise the linguistic minorities. The Directorate of Kokborok and Other minority languages of Tripura was established on August 14, 2012, to promote and develop the minority languages of the state. However, out of the remaining 98 languages of Tripura, the directorate has identified only eight minority languages, viz. Kokborok, Manipuri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Kuki-Mizo, Garo, Halam, Chakma and Mogh.The criteria for including the above-mentioned languages as the minority languages of Tripura and excluding the remaining languages are not clear. So, the exclusion or inclusion of a language as a linguistic minority in the state needs a clearer perspective. Except for Manipuri and Bishnupriya Manipuri, the enlisted minority languages are predominantly spoken by the Scheduled Tribes (STs) of the state. According to the Constitution of India, Article 366 (25), STs are defined as "Such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342".

The criteria for inclusion of people in the ST category are based on social, educational, and economic backwardness, as well as primitive agricultural practices, lack of infrastructure facilities, and geographical isolation.

In India, linguistic minorities are recognised at the state level, while religious minorities are recognised at the national level. Before further proceeding, it is essential to understand how minorities are conceptualised at the international level as well as in India. A universally accepted definition of minorities is challenging due to the diverse situations in which they live (OHCHR, 2010). Some live in well-defined areas separated from the dominant population, while others live in scattered locations and have varying identities and histories (OHCHR, 2010). Capotorti (1977) defined minority in 'Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities' as "A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members-being nationals of the State possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language". Therefore, the criteria for defining a minority may be based on various aspects of culture, tradition, religion or language. One of the important aspects in the definition of minority is the requirement to be in a numerically non-dominant position of a state (OHCHR, 2010). As far as the conceptualisation of linguistic minority is concerned at the international level, the United Nation Human Rights Committee expresses that the term 'linguistic minority' should be used to describe any language group that is a numerical minority throughout the nation, not just in a province or other part of it (United Nations, 1993).

In the case of a diverse linguistic country like India, where states are reorganised based on the majority linguistic lines, the suggestion of the United Nation Human Rights Committee for defining the language minority is not sufficient. In India, a language may be a minority at the national level, but it can be dominant at the state level. The central crisis in defining or categorising a language minority arises because a 'linguistic minority' is not defined in the Constitution of India. However, the Constitution of India safeguards the rights of linguistic minorities, as found in Article 29 and Article 30. Article 29 ensures the protection of the interests of minorities. The clauses in Article 29 are-, "(1) Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same. (2) No citizen shall be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the state or receiving aid from state funds on grounds only of religion, race, caste, language or any of them". And article 30 provides the Right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions. As stated earlier, linguistic minorities are recognised at the state level. According to the Government of India, Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities in India (n.d.), "Linguistic minorities at the state level means any group or groups of people whose mother tongues are different from the principal language of the state, and at the district and taluka /tehsil levels, different from the principal language of the district or taluka/tehsil concerned". In India, it is a fact that linguistic minorities are based on the lower share of the population in a state. For example, in the 52nd Report of the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities in India, the Manipuri language is not considered a minority language of Manipur because it is the most dominant language of the Manipur state (Government of India, 2016). However, Manipuri has been identified as a minority language in Tripura owing to its lower share of speakers. The other languages, like Munda, Kurukh Oraon, Santali, Khasi, Lepcha, etc., with speakers lower than Manipuri The other languages, like Munda, Kurukh Oraon, Santali, Khasi, Lepcha, etc., with speakers lower than Manipuri language in Tripura, have been left out. It is unclear how much of a language's share in the state's total population is considered a minority in the state, have been left out. It is unclear how much of a language's share in the state's total population is considered a minority in the state. The Supreme Court of India 1958 provided a criteria for defining minority language as "the language of the minority community" numerically having less than 50 per cent (as cited in Pandharipande, 2002). So, it can be said that less than or more than 50 per cent share of the total population is the threshold for the identification of a minority language. Pandharipande (2002) argued that this criterion is not applicable at the national level since no single language has the majority of 50 per cent in India. Hence, this definition needs reconsideration at the state level. Even after considering this population threshold criterion, not all languages with less than 50 per cent share of the total population of Tripura have the minority status. So, it is difficult to comprehend the criteria of identifying a linguistic minority in the states of India. Pandharipande (2002) argues that minority languages in India can also be defined based on the functional load and functional transparency. According to her, functional load of a language is the capacity to operate effectively in one or more social domains. In contrast, functional transparency is the autonomy and control of a language within a

specific domain, or the belief that a language is suitable for performing a specific function (for example, Sanskrit in Hinduism).

In the study of linguistic minorities, one of the most critical questions is whether a minority linguistic community should be defined based on indigenous and endemic criteria. Taking the case of the Manipuri language in Tripura, which is generally considered indigenous to Manipur state, it can be said that a linguistic minority recognised in an Indian state may or may not be an indigenous population of the state. It is also true that language does not remain in water-tight containment. They tend to be distributed in core areas and peripheral areas. However, the core areas are generally considered the home of the language. To establish the relationship between linguistic minorities and indigenous population, it is important to know how indigenous population is conceptualised. According to Cobo (1987) "Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sections of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non dominant sections of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems". According to the OHCHR (2010) of the United Nations, there are several commonalities between indigenous peoples and national, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities. Both the indigenous people and minorities are non-dominant population; their cultures, beliefs, and language are generally distinct from the dominant society they live in, and both aim to retain and promote their distinct identity (OHCHR, 2010). In the case of Tripura, the Kokborok language, the largest among the minority languages, belongs to the indigenous population of the Schedule Tribe group. The terms tribe and indigenous are used interchangeably; however, it is to be noted that not all tribes of Tripura are indigenous to Tripura.

Generally, the minority indigenous languages are of low functional importance in India and elsewhere in the world. There are hierarchies of languages used in India. Pandharipande (2002) argues that a hierarchy of functional load of languages in India coincides with power (political, economic, cultural) hierarchy. The higher the functional load (for example, English used in various domains of education, business, technology, national and international communication, etc.), the more power the language has. Regional languages also cover private and public domains, while tribal languages are used mainly in the private household domain, thus resulting in a lower functional load. Linguistic inequality in India is institutionalised through the constitutional safeguarding of 22 languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, with the recognition of English as an associate official language (Mohanty, 2010). Inclusion of a few privileged scheduled languages and exclusion of the majority of the languages in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India is unclear. Abhi (2012) argued that the inclusion or exclusion of languages in the Eighth Schedule is neither based on the number of speakers nor on fundamental rights, the principle of equality of opportunity or the ideology of national integration or invasive assimilation. She emphasised that had this been the case, many languages from the Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman branches would have been included in the schedule languages. In contrast, Sanskrit, with few speakers, would have not. She further ranked the languages in India from top to bottom in the following way: English, Sanskrit, scheduled languages, dialects of scheduled languages, non-scheduled languages, dialects of non-scheduled languages, and languages not recognised (less than 10,000 speakers). Mohan (2010), on the other hand, lists only five hierarchy levels of the Indian languages from top to bottom: classical languages, scheduled languages, dialects of scheduled languages, non-scheduled languages and dialects of non-scheduled languages. Mohanty (2010) observed language hierarchy maintained in South Asia, with English and national languages occupying the topmost level, followed by major regional languages in the middle and indigenous and tribal languages at the bottom of the hierarchy. He further argues that in a hierarchical power structure of language, the indigenous tribal minority (ITM) languages are pushed out of significant public domains and marginalised, leading to progressive domain shrinkage, which further results in language deprivation, threats of language shift, and identity crises of ITM.

In India's linguistic scenario, there are 170 languages under threat, and more than half of the languages under threat belong to the Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeast India (Blackburn & Opgenort, 2010). The Tibeto-Burmese languages in Northeast India are mainly spoken by the tribes. Kokborok language spoken by the Boroks of Tripura is one of them. Blackburn & Opgenort (2010) further identified that, with a few exceptions, these endangered languages lack official recognition, a literary tradition, a script, or necessary state support. Mohanty (2010) has noted the linguistic inequality in India due to institutionalisation via constitutional and statutory recognition of some of the

languages and excluding many languages, especially the minority languages and the tribal languages lacking in number games. The number games is an exception only in the case of English and Sanskrit, the former being the most favoured international language and the latter being a classical language, with a dominant position in religious rituals.

From the above literature, it is evident that the definition of linguistic minorities in India is complex and obscure. The present study aims to identify the endemic and minority languages from the existing enlisted minority languages of Tripura, viz. Kokborok, Manipuri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Kuki-Mizo, Garo, Halam, Chakma and Mogh to preserve and protect the minority languages. If a language is endemic to a state and found nowhere else, preserving the language is necessary. If a language endemic to an area is lost and threatened, its revival is next to impossible. Moreover, since a language is the repository of history, culture, and knowledge of the surrounding environment, the preservation and restoration of the endemic language of a state is vital. Therefore, for this study, the following criteria are considered for the identification of the endemic and linguistic minority, which would serve in the protection and preservation of the language minority not only in Tripura but at the country and global level:

- Endemicity: The language must be endemic to that state of India and, at the same time, belong to a minority language.

- Minority at all levels: The language should be a minority language at the three levels, i.e., world, country and state level. Suppose a language is a minority at all levels; the threat of the language becoming extinct will be higher. Proper measures are required to preserve and conserve the vitality of the language, at least at one of the levels. Therefore, identifying minority languages should be done from top to bottom level to know the language's position at each level. Recognition of linguistic minorities at lower levels, like districts, blocks, and tehsils, is fruitless as the majority of the policy interventions by the governments are made at the state level and rarely below the state level, especially in India. For example, teaching languages in educational institutes is implemented based on the proportion of the language speakers at the state level.

- Population of Speakers: The proportion of speakers and the rank of the language must be considered to identify a linguistic minority.

Firstly, the Supreme Court of India in 1958 considered a language with less than 50 per cent speakers at the state level to be a minority language. Suppose a language has more than 50 per cent speakers and is dominant in any of the states of India. That language should not be a linguistic minority in other Indian states even if their speakers constitute less than 50 per cent of the total population because the use and vitality of the language are not threatened.

Secondly, if no single language has more than 50 per cent of speakers at the country or state level, then the rank of the language needs to be considered. Suppose a language ranks first in a country, constituting less than 50 per cent of speakers. In that case, the language should be considered dominant, not a minority language. For example, at the country level, Hindi is a dominant language in India despite having 43.63 per cent (Census of India, 2011) of speakers because it ranks first in the total number of speakers in India. So, Hindi cannot be a minority language in any of the states of India. Similarly, at the state level, a language ranking first in speakers in a state of India should not be considered a linguistic minority in any other state of India.

- Non-dominant language: The minority language is not functionally the principal or the most significant language of the state.

2. Materials and Method

2.1. Material

This study is based on the secondary data collected from the Census of India, 2011 (Population by Mother Tongue and Primary Census Abstract) and Ethnologue, 2024.

2.2. Methods

In this study, a descriptive research method has been adopted to meaningfully analyse and interpret the data. The share and concentration of a language is calculated with the help of the following percentage technique:

i.   Share of Kokborok speakers in the state = Total population of Kokborok speakers in the state divided by (÷) Total population in the state multiplied by (×) 100.

ii.   Concentration of Kokborok speakers in the state = Total population of Kokborok speakers in the state divided by (÷) Total Kokborok speakers in India (×) 100.

3. Result and Discussion

The results and discussions are categorised into two broad findings, i.e., language demography and minority languages of Tripura.

3.1. Language Demography

The language demography of Tripura is discussed at three levels- language family, scheduled and non-scheduled languages, and individual languages of Tripura. The language demography is discussed to reveal the state's linguistic scenario before discussing the minority languages of Tripura.

3.1.1 Language family

The first classification is based on linguistic affiliation. Based on linguistic affiliation, five language families, viz. the Indo-European, Tibeto-Burmese, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and Semito-Hemitic, are found in Tripura (Table 1). Ninety-nine per cent of the total speakers of Tripura belong to only two language families, viz., the Indo-European and the Tibeto-Burmese, each comprising 69.4 per cent and 29.5 per cent, respectively. These two language families are distributed across the state, concentrating in specific areas.

Table 1. Language family affiliations of Tripura, 2011

Language Family	Percentage to total Speakers
Indo-European	69.4
Tibeto-Burmese	29.5
Austro-Asiatic	0.6
Dravidian	0.4
Semito-Hemitic	0.01
Others	0.1
Total	100

Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011

The main languages of the Indo-European language family are Bengali, Hindi, Odia, Bishnupriya, etc., whereas Kokborok, Manipuri, Mogh, Halam, and Garo are the languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burmese language family (Table 2). The remaining one per cent of the speakers belongs to the Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and Semito-Hemitic language families, including the non-classified 'Other languages' (Table 1). The small and negligible number of speakers belonging to these language families is due to their far-distance linguistic territories (dominant concentration areas) from Tripura. For instance, the language territory of Austro-Asiatic is mainly in Central India, and Dravidian is in South India. This also suggests that the speakers of these language families have the least migration effect in the state.

Table 2. Languages spoken in Tripura, 2011

Category	Language name	Language family	Schedule Tribe/ Non-Scheduled Tribe	Scheduled language/ Non-Scheduled language	Percentage to total speakers
More than 10,000 Speakers in India and in Tripura	Bengali	Indo-European	Non-ST	SL	65.7
	Hindi	Indo-European	Non-ST	SL	2.1
	Odia	Indo-European	Non-ST	SL	0.7
	Manipuri	Tibeto-Burmese	Non-ST	SL	0.7
	Bishnupriya	Indo-European	Non-ST	Non-SL	0.6
	Kokborok	Tibeto-Burmese	ST	Non-SL	25.9
	Mogh	Tibeto-Burmese	ST	Non-SL	0.9
	Halam	Tibeto-Burmese	ST	Non-SL	0.6
	Garo	Tibeto-Burmese	ST	Non-SL	0.6
	Ao	Tibeto-Burmese	ST	Non-SL	0.5
More than 10,000 speakers in India but less than 10,000 speakers in Tripura	Remaining 87 number of Languages	All language Family	ST/ Non-ST	Total	1.5
				SL	19.1
				Non-SL	80.9
Less than 10,000 speakers in India or not identifiable on the basis of the linguistic information available	Others	All language Family	ST/ Non-ST	SL/Non-SL	0.1

Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011

Note: ST: Scheduled Tribe; Non-ST: Non-Scheduled Tribe; SL: Scheduled Language; Non-SL: Non-Scheduled Language

3.1.2 Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India

The second discussion is based on the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India. Census of India, 2011 classifies twenty-two Scheduled Languages (Part A) included in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India and ninety-nine numbers of Non-Scheduled Languages (Part B) not included in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India and one number of 'Other' languages category totalling to 121 languages. The 'Other' languages include all the languages and mother tongues falling under Part B, i.e. Non-Scheduled Languages, which returned less than 10,000 speakers each in India. This means any language which has less than 10,000 speakers in India during the Census enumeration is categorised under 'Other' language category. The Census of India identifies and records only those languages with the strength of 10,000 or more speakers at the all-India level. Owing to this, there has been an increase and decrease in the number of languages compared to the preceding census decades, as some languages

were removed from the list and few languages were included. However, the rationale behind taking 10,000 speakers as the threshold for considering a language in the list is ambiguous. This feature of the Census of India conceals the linguistic diversity and eventually makes the minority languages even more vulnerable to extinction. Mohanty (2010) also noted this finding.

Tripura recorded the presence of ninety-nine numbers (including the 'Other' languages category) of languages in 2011. This number could change as the definition of language and dialect sometimes is blurred. Out of the ninety-nine languages in Tripura, 22 are scheduled languages, and 77 are non-scheduled languages (76 classified languages and 1 'Other' language). Although the non-scheduled languages are numerous compared to the scheduled languages, they comprise only thirty per cent of the speakers in Tripura. The non-scheduled language speakers are dominantly the STs, which is evident from the fact that 68 out of 76 non-scheduled languages are spoken by several STs, indicating high linguistic diversity. Scheduled languages, accounting for 69.8 per cent, belong to the Non-STs (Table 3). As discussed earlier, the population of Tripura primarily comprises STs and Non-STs, with a share of 31.8 per cent and 68.2 per cent, respectively (Census of India, 2011). Hence, it is a proven fact that, at present, the Non-STs Hold the dominant position in the state while the STs Hold the minority position in the state. Before merging with the Indian Union in 1949, Tripura was a tribal-dominated kingdom, and the territories extended to a few districts of present-day Bangladesh. Largely surrounded by Bangladesh on its three sides, Tripura witnessed an influx of Bengali refugees, who dominantly constitute the Non-STs from Erstwhile East Pakistan, later Bangladesh. The migration of Bengali refugees into Tripura occurred due to the religious atrocities against minority Hindu Bengalis in the then East Pakistan and Bangladesh (Menon, 1975; Debbarma, 2023), mainly after Tripura merged with the Indian Union. This trebled the population and reduced the tribal population of Tripura to a minority. So, the population composition of Tripura also indicates that the language of the Non-STs will obviously be dominant as compared to the STs.

Table 3. Percentage of Scheduled and Non-Scheduled Language speakers in Tripura, 2011

Languages	Percentage
Scheduled Language	69.8
Non-Scheduled Language	30.1
Other Language	0.1

Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011

3.1.3 Languages of Tripura

As discussed in the previous sections, Tripura had 99 languages out of the 121 languages in 2011. Out of the 99 languages recorded in Tripura, only 10 languages have 10,000 or more speakers at the state level (Table 2). In the language demography of Tripura, Bengali language, belonging to the Indo-European language family, is the most dominant language in the state as its speakers alone constitute more than 50 per cent of the population. The Bengali speakers account for 65.7 per cent of the speakers in the state (Table 2). The Bengali language is the lingua franca in the state, spoken by diverse social groups, primarily Non-STs. If the share of Bengali speakers is compared among the Non-STs, it is as high as 92.5 per cent (Table 4). Bengali is not only a dominant language of the state but also a Widespread language in different parts of the world. It is the second most dominantly spoken language in India (Census of India, 2011) and seventh-most dominant in the world (Ethnologue, 2024). Other significant languages within the Non-STs are Hindi (2.7 per cent), Odia (0.9 per cent), Manipuri (0.9 per cent) and Bishnupriya (0.9 per cent). These five languages together comprise 98 per cent of the Non-STs. What is striking is that the majority of the Non-STs belong to the Indo-European language family, with the Manipuri language being an exception.

In the linguistic scenario of Tripura, the Kokborok language, belonging to the Tibeto-Burmese family, is the state's second most spoken language after the Bengali language. However, they account for only 25.9 per cent of the total speakers in the state (Table 2). Thus, the Kokborok language, primarily spoken by the STs, has a minority status. Other tribes' languages with 10,000 or more speakers at the all-India level and the state level are Mogh,

Halam, Garo and Ao. Each language comprises less than 1 per cent of the speakers at the state level (Table 2). Like the Non-STs, which majorly belong to the Indo-European language family, most STs belong to the Tibeto-Burmese language family, except for the Austro-Asiatic speakers.

Table 4. Percentage of language speakers within the Non-Scheduled Tribes (Non-STs) of Tripura, 2011

Language	Percentage of Non-Scheduled Tribe speakers
Bengali	92.5
Hindi	2.7
Odia	0.9
Manipuri	0.9
Bishnupriya	0.9
Telugu	0.2
Nepali	0.1

Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011

The remaining languages (with more than 10,000 speakers at all India levels but less than 10,000 speakers in Tripura) comprise 1.5 per cent of the total speakers in Tripura (Table 2). These languages, totalling 87 numbers with 80.9 per cent, dominantly belong to the non-scheduled languages, which are majorly the tribes of the Tibeto-Burmese language family and the Austro-Asiatic language family. In contrast, only 19.1 per cent belong to the scheduled languages and are majorly the non-tribes of the Indo-European language family and the Dravidian language family (Table 2). The majority of the minority language speakers, who are primarily the STs, are heavily concentrated in the interior hill areas of the state in Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC). These diverse numbers of language speakers with small populations are scattered in the hilly areas. The small population size and the scattered nature of the population distribution pattern further add to the negligence in the development of the language speakers as well as the areas inhabited by these small language speakers.

Languages with less than 10,000 speakers each have been clubbed together and classified as a single category as 'Other' languages. They comprise 0.1 per cent of the total speakers in Tripura (Table 2). These languages lack representation in the state as an important language, at least in the census record. Not only do these languages miss out on numbers, but they are also not recorded properly and hence fail to benefit from policy intervention related to the development of the languages.

3.2. The Minority languages of Tripura

The Directorate of Kokborok and Other minority languages of Tripura recognises Kokborok and seven other minority languages, viz. Manipuri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Kuki-Mizo, Garo, Halam, Chakma and Mogh as the minority languages of the state. The directorate of Kokborok and Other minority languages in Tripura recognises Kuki-Mizo as one language. However, Kuki and Mizo are recognised as separate languages in the Census of India and Ethnologue. Thus, in this study, the Kuki and Mizo language will be considered separately. Hence, the analysis is done based on the nine minority languages, namely Kokborok, Manipuri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Kuki, Mizo, Garo, Halam, Chakma and Mogh. As stated in the introduction section, this paper aims at the identification of the endemic and minority language of the state for the protection and preservation of the language; the criteria as mentioned in the introduction, viz. endemic language, minority at all levels, population and rank of speakers, non-dominant language is used for the identification of minority languages. So, it is important to first discuss the endemic languages from the list of minority languages. This can be achieved by finding out the distribution and concentration of each language.

The minority languages of Tripura can be categorised into two types based on their concentration, i.e., core areas and periphery areas.

3.2.1 Core areas outside India

The languages viz. Halam, Chakma and Mogh are listed as a minority in Tripura. However, their core area is not in India or Tripura but instead in Myanmar and Bangladesh (Table 5 and Table 6). So, in light of identifying the endemic language of Tripura, it can be said that Tripura is a periphery of these languages. Hence, these languages are not endemic to the state.

Table 5. Distribution of minority languages of Tripura in the world, 2024

Language	Distribution (Country Level)	Total speaker in the country to total speakers in the world (Per cent)
Kokborok	India	99.5
	Bangladesh	0.5
Manipuri	India	99.2
	Bangladesh	0.8
Bishnupuriya Manipuri	India	66.6
	Bangladesh	33.4
Kuki	India	90.4
	Myanmar	9.6
Mizo	India	98.5
	Myanmar	1.5
Garo	India	93.7
	Bangladesh	6.3
Halam	India	36.1
	Myanmar	63.9
Chakma	India	32.1
	Bangladesh	67.9
Mogh	India	14.1
	Bangladesh	85.9

Source: Calculated from Ethnologue (Eberhard *et al.*, 2024)

3.2.2. Core areas within India

The languages viz. Kokborok, Manipuri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Kuki, Mizo and Garo have their core areas within India with dominant concentration areas in different states of India (Table 6). Kokborok, Manipuri, and Bishnupriya Manipuri speakers have high concentration areas in Tripura, Manipur and Assam, respectively. The majority of the Kuki speakers are concentrated in Manipur, Assam and Nagaland. Mizo and Garo speakers have dominant concentration areas in Mizoram and Meghalaya, respectively.

Thus, it is very clear from Table 5 and Table 6 that, except for the Kokborok language, the core areas of other minority languages lie outside Tripura, both in the case of languages with language domain within India as well as outside India. This is so because out of the total Kokborok speakers in the world, 99 per cent are concentrated in India, and within India, 94 per cent of the Kokborok speakers are concentrated in Tripura alone (Table 5, 6 and 7). Since language does not remain in water-tight containment, the contiguous bordering areas of Tripura (Assam,

Mizoram) and Bangladesh (Chittagong hill tracts) represent the periphery area of the Kokborok language. However, they have a negligible concentration in all other areas except Tripura. Thus, it is proven that Kokborok is autochthonous and endemic to Tripura (India).

Table 6. The dominant concentration states of minority languages of Tripura within India, 2011.

Language	State Name	Total Speakers in the State to Total Speakers in India (per cent)
Kokborok	Tripura	94.0
Manipuri	Manipur	86.4
Bishnupriya Manipuri	Assam	67.6
Kuki	Manipur	45.02
	Assam	26.6
	Nagaland	21.9
	Total	93.5
Mizo	Mizoram	96.6
Garo	Meghalaya	81.8

Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011

Table 7. Distribution of Kokborok Speakers in India, 2011

State Name	Persons	Total speaker in the state to total speakers in the country (per cent)
Tripura	950875	94.03
Mizoram	32634	3.23
Assam	22890	2.26
Meghalaya	2735	0.27
Nagaland	339	0.03
Gujarat	239	0.02
Manipur	208	0.02
Jammu And Kashmir	190	0.02
Rajasthan	169	0.02
West Bengal	120	0.01
Maharashtra	118	0.01
Karnataka	114	0.01
Punjab	95	0.01
Arunachal Pradesh	90	0.01
Uttar Pradesh	63	0.01
Haryana	59	0.01
Nct of Delhi	58	0.01

Andhra Pradesh	39	0.00
Uttarakhand	33	0.00
Jharkhand	29	0.00
Andaman and Nicober Island	26	0.00
Madhya Pradesh	26	0.00
Orissa	24	0.00
Chhattisgarh	23	0.00
Tamil Nadu	23	0.00
Himachal Pradesh	18	0.00
Sikkim	14	0.00
Kerala	13	0.00
Chandigarh	11	0.00
Bihar	7	0.00
Dadra and Nagar Haveli	6	0.00
Daman and Diu	5	0.00
Goa	1	0.00
Lakshadweep	0	0.00
Pondicherry	0	0.00
Total	1011294	100

Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011

As stated, Tripura (India) ranks first among Kokborok speakers at the world, country, and state levels. Therefore, special focus is to be given to this minority language as once a language is lost, it is nearly impossible to revive. Kokborok language is generally spoken by nine indigenous communities of Tripura, namely the Debbarma, Tripura, Jamatia, Noatia, Reang, Uchoi, Murasingh, Koloi and Rupini. The Debbarma and Tripura surname bearers are constitutionally categorised under the Tripuri community, and the last two communities, Koloi and Rupini, under the umbrella of the Halam community. Kokborok language, as Harmon (1996) puts it, holds unique traits and adaptations to environmental conditions in India (Tripura, Mizoram, Assam) and Bangladesh (Chittagong hill tracts).

Since no other languages of Tripura are endemic to Tripura, the other considerations such as a linguistic minority at all levels, population of speakers, and non-dominant or non-principal language of the state will be discussed, focusing on the Kokborok language. The Kokborok language speakers claim themselves to be the indigenous population of the state. Kokborok speakers can be considered an indigenous community in Tripura and its adjoining areas because the language speakers also fulfil the criteria of the indigenous population of the United Nations given by Cobo (1987), as mentioned in the introduction. The Kokborok language speakers have had historical continuity from the pre-colonial societies till the present. They generally belong to the STs of Tripura, who were the earliest settlers of the state. The Kokborok speakers also have a distinct culture and language from other sections of the societies now prevailing in Tripura. They form, at present, the non-dominant sections of society and are determined to preserve their language and culture. In terms of strength, although the Kokborok language speakers rank second at the state level, they represent only a quarter (25.9 per cent) of the speakers of Tripura. Hence, following the criteria of minority provided by the Supreme Court of India in 1958, Kokborok is a minority language in Tripura. Kokborok is not only a minority in Tripura, but it is also a minority language in India and the world. It is also one of the vulnerable languages enlisted by UNESCO in 2010 (Blackburn & Opgenort, 2010). UNESCO (2003) has defined vulnerable language as "Most, but not all, children or families of a particular community speak their

parental language as their first language, but this may be restricted to specific social domains (such as the home, where children interact with their parents and grandparents". The vulnerability status of the Kokborok language is indeed true in India. This language is primarily used within the household domains. Thus, the argument made by Pandharipande (2002) related to minority languages holding low functional load is true for the Kokborok language. Although the Kokborok language is one of the official languages of Tripura, along with Bengali, it is not widely used in government administration, education, the commercial sector, etc. It is because of the low functional load of the Kokborok language that many speakers, especially the urban inhabitants, shifted their language to the functionally important Bengali language in Tripura. One may argue about the use of Kokborok in educational institutes in Tripura. It is true that Kokborok is used in educational institutes. However, it is not widespread. As of 31.03.2021, there are 4934 schools in Tripura, including Madrasas (Government of Tripura, Directorate of Secondary Education). Kokborok is taught as a medium of instruction in 783 primary schools (Government of India, 2011) and as a language subject only in 46 upper primaries and High schools (Government of India, 2011; 2014; 2016). However, in the 52nd report of the commissioner for linguistic minorities, it has been reported that the Kokborok language is not used as a medium of instruction at any level of schooling in Tripura (Government of India, 2016). So, even though the Kokborok language is institutionalised, it is not widespread. Apart from the limited use of Kokborok in educational institutions, this language is also not widely used in official circulars, press, television, courts, financial institutions, social institutions and digital domain resulting in low language vitality.

It is important to mention here that, in the language demography of Tripura, Bengali language is the principal language of the state. Just like the Bengali language is the lingua franca of Tripura, Kokborok is also the lingua franca, especially among the STs who are majorly concentrated in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) areas, an area demarcated for the tribes due to their dominance. It is also noteworthy to mention that Kokborok used to be the lingua franca in the erstwhile Tripura Kingdom before the large-scale arrival of refugees from East Pakistan and later Bangladesh. This share goes up to 79.8 per cent when the speakers are compared within the STs (Table 8). However since the STs, in general, and Kokborok speakers, in particular, have become a numerical minority. The Kokborok language has now become a minority endangered indigenous language in Tripura, where the language is endemic.

Table 8. Percentage of Kokborok speakers in Tripura, 2011

Total speakers in Tripura	Total ST Speakers	Total Kokborok speakers	Total Kokborok speakers within ST	Percentage of Kokborok speakers out of total speakers	Percentage of Kokborok speakers out of total ST speakers
3673917	1166813	950875	930687	25.9	79.8

Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011

In light of discussing the endemicity, vulnerability and minority character of the Kokborok language, it is also essential to highlight the standardisation of the Kokborok language and its repercussions in preserving the different dialects, as highlighted in the preceding discussions. It is essential to mention that the distinction between language and dialect is blurry. It is generally agreed on linguistic lines that dialects are different language varieties that are mutually intelligible (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998; Crystal, 2000). However, mutual intelligibility in the distinction between dialect and language may be questionable. For example, the Scandinavian languages, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish, are typically considered distinct despite mutual intelligibility (Chambers & Trudgill, 1988). Their speakers consider these Scandinavian languages different because they belong to separate nations. Thus, only mutual intelligibility does not decide what dialect and language are. Political, geographical, historical, sociological and cultural factors also determine the identity of language and dialects. This blurry definition of language and dialect is one of the root causes of identity politics in India, where states are reorganised based on the dominant majority language, where minority language speakers seek recognition. In northeast India, identity politics based on language and ethnicity are common, leading to many conflicts in the region in the past. For instance, during the British period, British officials view the Assamese language as a dialect of Bengali, recognising Bengali as vernacular for Assamese people since 1837, suppressing the Assamese language (Guha, 1984). The recognition of Bengali as the language of

Assamese people led to the rise of Assamese nationalism, opposing Bengali 'expansionism' (Haokip, 2009). The continuous effort of Assamese speakers for recognition in Assam finally resulted in the declaration of Assamese as the official language of Assam in 1960. However, this further added identity awareness among other language speakers of the region, consequently resulting in the bifurcation of Assam into Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1969 and Mizoram in 1972 due to language politics (Haokip, 2009). In multi-ethnic regions like Northeast India, identity politics fuelled by linguistics and ethnic lines have the potential for future conflicts. For instance, the demand for a separate state in Tripura, i.e., 'Tipraland' by the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT) and 'Greater Tripraland' by the Trpraha Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance also known as TIPRA Motha, is a living example of identity awareness and protection.

It is essential to mention here that the standardisation of mutually intelligible variants into one language plays a significant role in official recognition and policy intervention (e.g., language implementation in educational institutions). For example, the standardisation of the Assamese language, Mizo, etc., occurred during its official recognition process. In the case of the standardisation of the Kokborok language, the initial contributors in the field of language and literature used the dialect spoken mainly by the Debbarma community, which over time became the standardised form of Kokborok language in the process of official use and policy implementation, especially in the educational sector. It is to be noted that, in every language, its variants are sacrificed for standardisation. The resistance towards standardisation is always there due to identity consciousness. For instance, in the case of Kokborok speakers, some Reangs or Brus identify their language as Kaubru, differentiating their spoken variation from Kokborok. It would be very good if every language variant could be protected; however, it will pose difficulties at the policy implementation level. For example, in implementing the Kokborok subject in school, the subject has to be written in nine dialects, which would be time and resource-consuming. Thus, standardisation is vital for the common good of the language. This does not mean that other variants of the languages should be treated as inferior. The variant speakers can enrich their dialect through inter-generational transmission, documentation of the variants, etc. For example, Bhojpuri has been transmitted through generations; it is well documented in literature, mass media, and digital media, even though it is considered a Hindi dialect. As a result, this dialect is safe and not endangered.

4. Limitations

The present study has some limitation. Firstly, the existing criteria used by the government to define minority languages are blurred. The criteria for the exclusion and inclusion of a language as a minority language are not clear. Secondly, the study has limitations in the identification of numerically non-dominant minority languages, with less than 10,000 speaker's at all Indian levels due to the classification of languages by the Census of India. Identifying which languages are included in the 'Other language' category is impossible. Hence, many languages, at least in the census classification, are not identifiable and are left out of policy interventions.

Thirdly, in northeast India, the language classification is actually entangled. The Hmar speakers of Mizoram majorly affiliate themselves with the Mizo identity without recognising its variant, while the Hmar speaking groups outside Mizoram, such as in Assam and Manipur, hold a distinctive identity separated from the Mizo (Khiangte et al., 2022). In Tripura, the Chakma consider themselves speakers of a language different from that of the Bengali language; however, it is recognised as part of the Bengali language by the Census of India. In the case of the Kokborok language, the Koloi and Rupini speak a variant of the Kokborok language, and they are mutually intelligible with other dialect speakers of the Kokborok language. However, they are categorised as part of the Halam community. Except for Koloi and Rupini, the speakers belonging to the Halam community do not have an identity affiliation with the Kokborok language. So, many of the languages of Northeast India require reclassification and regrouping by the government.

5. Implications

This study is significant in the identification of endemic minority languages not only at the state level but at the country and world level based on the set of criteria suggested in this study, viz. endemic language, minority at all levels, population of speakers in terms of proportion and rank, non-dominant or non-principal language. In this study, the mentioned criteria facilitated the identification of endemic and minority languages with core concentration

only in Tripura, i.e., the Kokborok language. This will enable the government to take proper initiatives to develop and protect this small language.

6. Conclusion

Tripura projects a unique mosaic of languages. Bengali is the most prominent language of the state, while many of the tribes' languages are minority languages. As the majority of the minority language belongs to the indigenous and tribal communities, their vulnerability is even more severe. Also Kokborok being an endemic and endangered vulnerable language, maintaining the language is very important. Support and promotion of Bengali language as an official language and its widespread usage in the administration, educational institutes, courts, business, mass media, etc., subsequently lead to language loss and language shift among the minority language speakers, thereby exerting pressure on the sustainability of the minority language groups.

In the view of preserving a language minority, a clear approach to defining or identifying the minority would serve in the preservation of the minority language. In India, the policy interventions from the government are made at the state and national levels. State policies are more important in recognising a minority language since minority languages are recognised at the state level in India. Since the purpose of the paper is identifying and preserving an endemic minority language, the criteria suggested in the paper, viz. endemic language, minority at all levels, proportion and rank of speakers, non-dominant or non-principal language, etc., would serve in identifying the language which is the minority language of an area. It is necessary to mention here that language endangerment and vulnerability should not be based only on population size; considerations should also be made regarding the use and vitality of the language.

In the case of the Kokborok language, it can be concluded that it is a minority language not only in Tripura but also in India and the world. As stated earlier, it is also a vulnerable language with low functional significance and is dominantly used at home by indigenous communities. Hence, the language should be preserved and developed by the government and its speakers and non-speakers of the state. The government may take the initiative to make the application of the language more widespread in the education sector, media, and government administration, which would benefit the development of the language.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, at https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/ and in Ethnologue at www.ethnologue.com

Has this article been screened for Similarity?

Yes

Conflict of interest

The Authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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