



## Kokborok Language Movement: A Resistance to Linguistic Imperialism and Cultural Hegemony in Tripura

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54392/ijll2621>

Received: 30-08-2025; Revised: 15-04-2026; Accepted: 24-04-2026; Published: 02-05-2026



**Abstract:** The Kokborok language movement in Tripura is marked by an effort to protect, promote, and preserve the identity of the language and the Boroks. The Kokborok language movement was largely a response to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of the language in the field of administration, education, political, social spheres etc. The main objectives of the Kokborok language movement were to gain recognition, official status and to introduce in the educational institutions. The marginalisation and stigmatisation of the language and its speakers began with the demographic, political and linguistic shifts from the Kokborok majority speakers in the pre integration period to the Bengali majority speakers following Tripura's integration to the Indian Union in 1949. The marginalisation and exclusion of the Kokborok language coupled with stigmatisation as a minority language, limited to household spheres resulted into Kokborok language movements. At present Kokborok is one of the official languages along with Bengali but is developing at snail's pace. The movement for Kokborok has been continuous but with the momentum gaining and losing at different points of time. Language development has been hindered by various factors including linguistic imperialism, stigmatisation of Kokborok and other minority languages, politicisation over script etc.

**Keywords:** Tripura, Kokborok, Marginalisation, Language Movement, Language Development

### 1. Introduction

In general minorities gradually lose their language and cultures due to the influence and pressure of dominant identities that coexist within the same geographical space more so political space such as within a state or a country. The marginalisation and stigmatisation of minority languages is rooted in the socio-economic inequalities that arise from the unequal distribution of power between the dominant and the non-dominant groups. Kokborok language, a language spoken by the Boroks comprising of nine indigenous communities of Tripura, India: the Debbarma, Tripura, Reang, Jamatia, Murasingh, Noatia, Uchoi, Koloi and Rupini together constitute 25.88 per cent of Tripura's language speakers in 2011. They belong to the indigenous scheduled tribes (STs) of the state and profess a common identity as Borok. In the distant past the Kokborok speakers and the indigenous Tribes in general were the most dominant group in the state with around 50.09 percent in 1941; however they have been reduced to a numerical minority (36.85 per cent) in 1951 as a result of the large scale Bengali refugee rehabilitation in Tripura following India's independence and merger of Tripura with Indian union in 1940s up to creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and post Bangladesh liberation who now constitute the largest speakers in Tripura with 65.73 per cent in 2011 (Debbarma & Debbarma, 2024). The minority status of the Kokborok speakers also had repercussions on the vitality and preservation of the Kokborok language. This situation is reflected in the inclusion of Kokborok as one of the vulnerable languages in the world by UNESCO in 2010 (Blackburn & Opgenort, 2010). The Kokborok language development movement in Tripura began in search of the cultural and political assertion of identity. Due to the minority status of the Kokborok language, its speakers has experienced cultural and linguistic erosion in the face of dominant language particularly Bengali, the second largest language in India as per Census of India (2011) and



seventh largest in the world as per [Ethnologue \(2025\)](#). The language development movement emerged as a resistance to protect and uphold the identity of the Borok people. The demand for recognition of the language and culture of the Kokborok speakers in Tripura arises from the marginalisation and stigmatisation of the Kokborok speakers by the dominant Bengali speakers. This situation is comparable in many parts of the world.

Language movements across the world emerge from the collective struggle of minority language communities to survive and assert their linguistic identity in the face of domination by more powerful languages. Studies have reflected that language domination often arises from the intervention of colonial powers or external dominant groups which frequently leads to the decline in number of indigenous and minority languages.

Several studies highlight the adverse effect of colonialism on the vitality and status of the indigenous languages. For instance, [Davies & Dubinsky \(2018\)](#); [Harmon & Loh \(2018\)](#) found that European invasion of Australia led to language shift among the Aboriginal communities leading to significant decline in the number of Aboriginal languages. [Davies & Dubinsky \(2018\)](#) documented the decline to be from 250 languages at the time of large-scale European invasion to fewer than 150 languages in the twenty-first century. Similar patterns are observed elsewhere, such as the shift from Bantu languages to Portuguese in Mozambique studied by [Chimbutane & Goncalves \(2023\)](#). Most of the time these changes are very systematic initiated by the government of the majority who are usually the dominant group. For instance, [Davies & Dubinsky \(2018\)](#) taking the examples of the aboriginal languages of Australia and the Sami people of Norway found out that systematic discrimination, suppression and assimilation through legislation, education system, land dispossession, enforced linguistic assimilation and brute force led to significant decline in the number of Aboriginal languages in favour of colonial languages.

In the linguistic assimilation process the governments have frequently used the education system as a primary tool to marginalise Indigenous languages. Comparable patterns are evident among the Ainu in Japan, Native Americans in the United States, the Maori in New Zealand where state policies either restricted the public and classroom use of Indigenous languages or gradually and systematically displaced them from formal education ([Davies & Dubinsky, 2018](#)). This kind of situation actually resulted in various resistance movements as evident in the case of the Sami or Maori people towards the linguistic assimilation and imposition policy of the government. This situation is a reflection of the unequal distribution of power resulting in linguistic hegemony where dominant languages acquire institutional authority at the expense of Indigenous and minority languages. [Guevara \(2022\)](#) demonstrated that the hierarchical dominance of global and colonial languages such as Spanish, English, Portuguese, and French constitute a major risk factor for Indigenous languages. She further highlighted that the indigenous languages in Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, and Guatemala are at a disadvantage despite similar and formal recognition as that of dominant language within a territory. The similar situation can be observed in terms of the linguistic minorities in Spain. [Urla \(1988\)](#) found out that the languages such as Galicians, Basques, and Catalans were declared co-official languages alongside Spanish, but activists continued to protest, demanding language planning and promotion through legislation, education programs, and media campaigns, arguing that official recognition alone is insufficient.

A similar configuration of dominance and marginality characterises the Indian linguistic landscape. Studies by [Shabad & Gunther \(1982\)](#); [Urla \(1988\)](#) have shown that, language has played a central role in cultural rights movements and political mobilisation. [Shabad & Gunther \(1982\)](#) emphasised that the presence of heterogeneous minority languages can lead to conflict, as disputes over governmental decentralisation and language policy often become particularly intense and may give rise to political unrest while linguistic homogeneity may contribute to national unity and political stability. India being a country of diverse linguistic stock is not devoid of linguistic based movement. The language movements in India can be traced back to colonial period. One such movement is the Oriya language movement which was active between 1868 and 1870 as per the studies conducted by [Mohanty \(2002\)](#). According to [Mohanty \(2002\)](#), Bengali teachers and textbooks dominated the educational system in Orissa division, leading to the marginalisation of the Oriya language. Following the Na'anika Famine of 1866, a resistance movement emerged demanding employment for locals and Oriya-medium education, which successfully ended neo-colonising Bengali control over schools by 1870 ([Mohanty, 2002](#)). Similar situation has been evident in the case of the Assamese language. [Basid \(2016\)](#) highlighted that the Assamese language issue originated in the nineteenth century when the British replaced Persian with Bengali as the court language and medium of instruction in Assam, thereby marginalising Assamese. According to him the imposition of Bengali as the official and instructional language in Assam initially faced little opposition, but resistance emerged especially from the late nineteenth century from American Baptist missionaries and the educated Assamese elite, who advocated for Assamese language. This



resistance towards Bengali expansionism continued during the Independence and post-independence period of India. The Assamese nationalism became closely tied to opposition to Bengali, which was viewed as an obstacle to the growth of Assamese language and culture. This culminated in the 1960 Official Language Bill, which declared Assamese the state's official language (Haokip, 2009). The language agitation in Assam did not end with recognition of Assamese language, it culminated into language based political movement which later led to formation of Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1969 and Mizoram in 1972 due to language politics (Haokip, 2009). Further, the Bodo land movement of Assam was driven not only by political and economic concerns but also by a strong desire to assert and preserve Bodo language and identity. The aspiration to preserve and assert Bodo identity is often standing in opposition to Assamese efforts to linguistically and culturally Assamise Assam (Das, 1994). The agitation towards the most dominant language i.e., Hindi is also evident in India. For instance, the Anti-Hindi agitation in Madras that peaked in 1965 reflects resistance to the central government's attempt to impose Hindi in non-Hindi region. In Madras (now Tamil Nadu) Tamil is the dominantly spoken language, Hindi imposition was perceived as a threat not merely to the status of the Tamil language but to the future position and opportunities of Tamilians in a nation structured around Hindi dominance (Forrester, 1966). It is important to note that language movements in India have often emerged as a response to the marginalisation of non-dominant languages and to state policies. Moreover, India's policy on linguistic recognition remains ambiguous and unclear. The Constitution recognises twenty-two Scheduled Languages under the Eighth Schedule and states designate their own official languages; minority linguistic communities continue to occupy subordinate positions relative to dominant regional and national languages. Within this unequal structure, language movements emerge as strategic responses through which minority language groups seek institutional recognition and symbolic legitimacy. While the number of speakers is often presented as the primary criterion for granting official language status, this principle is politically contested and mediated by access to power and mobilisation (Guevara, 2022). She has highlighted that official language status is shaped more by political mobilisation than by demographic strength alone. She further corroborated this finding with the delayed recognition of Santali in 2003, despite its larger speaker population than Bodo and Meitei.

The language movement in India not only revolves around the minority identity assertion and recognition, it also revolves around script. The Santal language movement, for instance, has mobilised around the Ol-Chiki script. Initiated by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in the early twentieth century, the creation of the Ol-Chiki script aimed to preserve and promote the Santali language by replacing the scripts that failed to capture its unique phonetic features (Murmu, 2024). According to Murmu (2024) this movement represents a broader cultural and educational renaissance, strengthening Santal self-awareness and pride, while enabling resistance against cultural assimilation. Besides securing recognition of Santali language within the 8<sup>th</sup> scheduled of Indian constitution in 2003, local tribal political movements have facilitated the institutionalisation of Santali as a medium or compulsory subject in schools across tribal-dominated regions of West Bengal, Odisha, and Jharkhand (Murmu, 2024; Acharya & Kshatriya, 2016). States also initiated teacher training and textbook publication in Ol-Chiki (Murmu, 2024; Acharya & Kshatriya, 2016). The similar script-based assertions are evident among the Kondh (with Kui as the language), the Oraon, and the Ho tribes with Warang Chiti in Odisha and the central Indian region (Acharya & Kshatriya, 2016); the Bodo through the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) demanding for the use of the Roman script for writing the Bodo language (Bijukumar, 2023). Bijukumar (2023) and Marconi Debbarma (2023) also highlighted the demand for Roman script among Kokborok speakers in Tripura.

In this study using the descriptive research method an attempt has been made to examine the factors and processes involved in the Kokborok language movement in Tripura pre and post Tripura merger with the Indian union. The study also focuses on the impacts of these movements in the development of Kokborok language. The present study is organised into three parts. The first part covers the study of the Kokborok language movement which is divided into two phases: the first phase covers the period before integration, while the second phase examines the period after integration with the Indian Union. The second part covers the factors leading to the rise of Kokborok language movement and the third part covers the impacts of the language movement.

## 2. The Kokborok language development movement

According to Debbarma & Debbarma (2016) the language development movement in Tripura originated with Jana Sikha movement in 1945 which demanded education for the illiterate Kokborok-speaking community. Although the Jana Sikha movement did not directly demand for the development of Kokborok language it did plant seeds for



later movements. According to [Debbarma & Debbarma \(2016\)](#), there are no records of when Bengali replaced Kokborok as the court language but the king of Tripura had close contact with Bengali since sixteenth century. They emphasised that gradually in the later period Bengali was introduced as court language of Tripura. Therefore, Bengali became the primary language of administration during the monarchy. Although Kokborok was not the court language of Tripura kingdom there are no records of Kokborok language movement during the monarchy period prior to 1945 although Bengali became the language of administration. It is most likely that the movements were not documented or because during the monarchy period the tribal subjects managed their own affairs at the village level pertaining to judgement, land ownership, exchange of goods and services etc. The village was headed by a village chief known as "Chokdiri/ Chouduri" and the majority of the issues were resolved at the village level in various ways among different Kokborok speaking communities. Hence there was minimum contact with the Bengalis and function of Bengali language was limited to the royal court and ultimately the common people were unaffected by the use of Bengali language. Moreover, in the pre integration period of Tripura with the Indian Union, the tribes in general and the Boroks in particular were a majority. In this setting, tribal communities saw their language and culture as prestigious and important, and thus had little reason to protest the dominance of Bengali language.

After Tripura's merger with India in 1949, process of nation building started with reorganisation of states based on language majority. Introduction of democracy, new laws and knowledge system for administration led to abolition of old monarchy system including currency, police system etc., and necessitated the use of common written language. This process coincided with the mass immigration of Bengali speakers to Tripura from erstwhile East Pakistan eventually giving them majority status of 60 % ([Some Basic Statistics of Tripura 1993](#); [Paul, 1967](#)) in 1951 a prerequisite for formation of democratic government and reducing the host community, the Boroks into a minority status to 23 % ([Some Basic Statistics of Tripura 1993](#); [Paul, 1967](#)) which ultimately facilitated Bengali getting the status of official language through Tripura official language Act, 1964. Further from 1949 until Tripura attained statehood in 1972 several administrators in various capacities were appointed by the Central government most of whom were Bengali speakers and none from the Kokborok speakers. With the wide use of Bengali in every administrative level and non-functioning of old social, political, economic systems etc., the Kokborok speakers realised that Kokborok was non-functional in democracy and in new administrative set up. As they adapted to new changes, they felt their language and culture were marginalised; Kokborok lacked status in government offices, and tribal language and traditions were often disparaged. This sense of cultural and linguistic marginalisation motivated the language development movement that emerged post integration with the Indian union.

As highlighted by [Debbarma & Debbarma, \(2016\)](#) in the preceding section, Gana Mukti Parishad (GMP) was formed in 1949 resulting to cultural awakening of the tribes following the Jana Sikha Movement in 1945. After almost two decades the language development movement gained momentum in 1967 with the entry of Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS), a regional party. The main demands of the TUJS were autonomy of Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), restoration of tribal alienated lands which were illegally transferred to the non-tribes and the recognition of the Kokborok language and the use of Roman script for its writing ([Ghosh, 2003](#)). Subsequently the Tripura Upajati Karmachari Samity (TUKS) and Tribal Students' Federation (TSF), presently known as Twipra Students Federation (TSF) were formed in 1968 all advocating for Kokborok language movement.

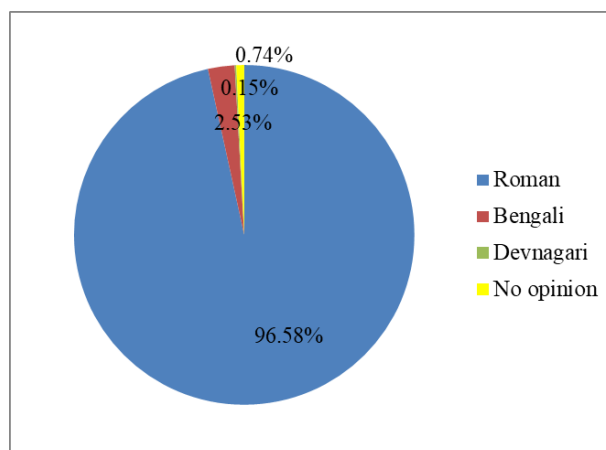
Currently, the language development movement is primarily related to the script issue. The demand for adopting the Roman script for Kokborok dates back to the 1960s, the same time TUJS demanded official status to Kokborok. However, issue arises from the fact that when Kokborok eventually gained official recognition in 1979 no specific script for writing the language was designated. Kokborok is a tonal language. Roman script was demanded for better articulation of the tonal variations of Kokborok terms which are otherwise altered when written in Bengali script. [Bijukumar \(2023\)](#) found out that according to Roman script advocates, the Bengali script, rooted in the Indo-Aryan tradition, is primarily phonetic, whereas Tibeto-Burman languages spoken by tribal communities in Northeast India rely heavily on intonation, which the Bengali script inadequately represents. Moreover, the Roman script is widely compatible with existing digital and technological platforms, making it more efficient for writing Kokborok. Many argue that adapting the Bengali script with creation of new characters for Kokborok language, still fails to represent Kokborok sounds accurately. This has led to a growing demand for the adoption of the Roman script among the Kokborok-speaking community. This simple demand placed in front of the state government has turned into a political issue, and the matter remains unresolved till today.



Debbarma & Debbarma, (2016) highlighted the use of Bengali script for writing Kokborok in formal education when the left front government, introduced Kokborok in primary schools using the Bengali script in Tripura in the 1970s, although there was no official government notice for its exclusive use. Following the official recognition of Kokborok, the government of Tripura did not take any immediate action to respond and address the growing concern for the demand of the Roman script until 1990. Only in 1990, a commission for development of Kokborok language headed by Shyama Charan Tripura was constituted to look into the development of Kokborok. In its 1991 report submitted to the government, the commission recommended the use of Roman script (Government of Tripura, 1991). However, the recommendation was not considered undermining the preferences of the Kokborok speakers. In 2004, under the Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPIM) rule, the Pabitra Sarkar commission was constituted by the State Government of Tripura which also recommended adoption of roman script for the proper representation and writings of Kokborok words (Government of Tripura, 2005). However, the government did not act on this recommendation as well.

The Directorate of Higher Education, Government of Tripura, surveyed college students studying Kokborok for two years in a row, from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021 in order to respond to the demand for Roman script. The survey revealed that out of six thousand six hundred forty-nine students surveyed, six thousand six hundred forty-three (99.90 per cent) preferred the Roman script, while only six (0.09 per cent) chose the Bengali script. Similarly, a survey of nine thousand one hundred forty-seven students in 2020-2021, showed that nine thousand one hundred forty-three (99.96 per cent) opted for the Roman script; while only four students (0.04 per cent) selected the Bengali script (Marconi Debbarma, 2023). The preference for roman script over other scripts has not changed much over the years. The field survey conducted during 2022–2023 for the present study covered 776 Borok individuals, of whom 672 were literate. The findings indicated that the Borok people clearly preferred the Roman script over other scripts within this literate population (Figure 1).

The script debate has further been exacerbated by the demand for the Devanagari script after Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power in Tripura in 2018. The competing scripts i.e., Bengali, Roman and Devanagari reflect deeper struggles over identity, cultural representation and power dynamics. The debates over which script i.e., Bengali, Roman or Devanagari should be used for Kokborok have become highly politicised, with different groups advocating for their preferred script based on cultural, regional, and political affiliations. This politicisation has impeded decision making and caused rifts within the Kokborok speaking community, which has a direct effect on language development, preservation and promotion.



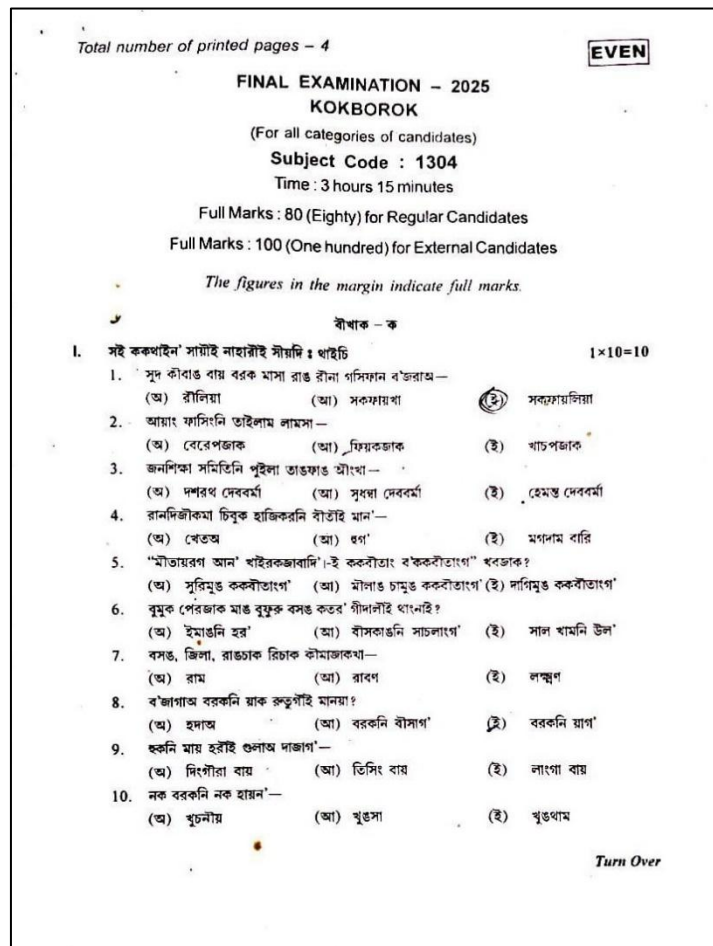
**Figure 1.** Choice of script among the literate Boroks for writing Kokborok language, 2022-2023

Source: Field Survey (October, 2022-January, 2023)

In response to rejection of adopting roman script by the government, the supporters of roman script have organised rally, sit in demonstrations, state wide strike etc., embodying the resistance against linguistic imperialism and cultural hegemony of the dominant language and linguistic and cultural marginalisation of the minority Kokborok language. Recent movements include sit in demonstration on Roman Script for Kokborok language organised by the "Roman Script for Kokborok Choba" on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2023 (Tripura Times, 2023), submission of memorandum in demand for Roman script for Kokborok by the TSF on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2023, State-wide strike in demand of Roman script for Kokborok language in the state by TSF on 28<sup>th</sup> August 2023 (TSF, 2023a; TSF, 2023b). The demand for Roman script

was fuelled when the local daily [Pratibadi Kalam \(2024\)](#) claimed that the Tripura Board of Secondary Education (TBSE) president instructed to lodge a First Information Report (FIR) against students who would write Kokborok paper exams in Roman script. Subsequently the TSF protested in front of TBSE office and demanded that the Kokborok exam be written in Roman script ([Tripura Times, 2024a](#)). On 12<sup>th</sup> February 2024 the Tipra Indigenous Students Federation (TISF) held a state-wide indefinite strike with TSF's support ([TISF, 2024; Tripura Times, 2024b](#)). Subsequently, the TBSE declared that Kokborok can be written both in Roman script and Bengali script in the examinations. However, there were no official notifications that Kokborok could be written both in Roman and Bengali scripts leading to intensification of protest in November 2024 ([Tripura Times, 2024c](#)). This fear is manifested in the recent 2025 TBSE secondary (Class-X) and Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) higher secondary (Class-XII) board examination where the students had the scope to answer either in Bengali or Roman script but the Kokborok question paper had been set only in Bengali script (Figure 2 & 3).

The non-institutionalisation of script has impacted the development of Kokborok language. Many schools are not teaching Kokborok as a subject due to the script issue. Kokborok subject would have been widely studied in Tripura, if the government had declared Roman or dual script (Roman and Bengali) as the script of Kokborok language, in response to the demands and needs of the majority Kokborok speakers. This issue has adversely impacted those students who chose Kokborok as a subject in the school. Students were harassed during the senior secondary examination of the Kokborok subject of TBSE held in 2023 ([Dongour TV Channel, 2023](#)).

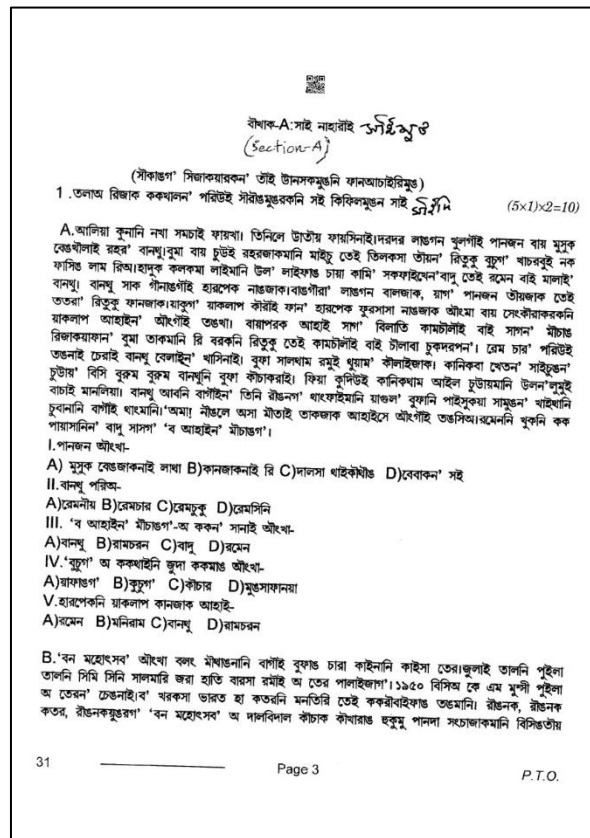


**Figure 2.** An excerpt from the Class X, TBSE, Kokborok question paper, conducted in 2025.

Source: Collected by the researcher from a student participant (2025)

The event occurred at Ompi Higher Secondary School, where students from Tuidu Higher Secondary Schools had come to sit their board exams. According to the report of [Dongour TV Channel \(2023\)](#) students were traumatised when they were prohibited to write the Kokborok exam in Roman script and were instructed to use only Bengali script and that the answer scripts would not be checked if they were written in Roman script. Subsequently it caused anxiety in the examination hall and forced the students to write their exam in Bengali script ([Dongour TV Channel, 2023](#)).





**Figure 3.** An excerpt from the Class XII, CBSE, Kokborok question paper conducted in 2025.  
Source: Collected by the researcher from a student participant, (2025)

The matter was brought up in the Tripura Legislative Assembly by the Members of Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Tipraha Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance (TIPRA) Motha Party. Animesh Debbarma, an MLA (TIPRA Motha Party) also questioned the government in the assembly why despite the on-going demand for Roman script it has recommended Bengali script and not Roman script for writing Kokborok under the CBSE (Haping TV, 2023). This whole situation actually aggravates the fear of opting Kokborok as a subject by the student community. This has resulted into further delay in introduction of Kokborok subject in many schools along with cultural and political friction in the state.

Meanwhile, Kokborok is written in both Bengali and Roman scripts in the higher education without any notification (Figure.4 and Figure. 5). It is noteworthy to mention that Mizo that has been opted as a language paper is written in Roman script. In contrast the Kokborok language has been denied the opportunity to write in the Roman script despite repeated demands since the Kokborok language movement began. Several critical questions arise regarding the government's attitude towards Kokborok speakers. Why does the government appear to be in conflict with Kokborok speakers while other tribal languages of Tripura do not face similar challenges? Does the government not support the development of the Kokborok language?

It is clear from the previous sections that the whole issue of script has been given a political outlook. In actual sense, script is not the utmost necessity for development of any language which is evident from the flourishing of dominant languages that do not have their own scripts. For example, English one of the most developed languages in the world doesn't have script of its own but uses the Roman script. Within Northeast India itself the languages like Mizo, Naga, and Khasi etc., are written in Roman script as per the convenience of the speakers. The Konkani language is written in five different scripts; Roman, Nagari, Kannada, Persian-Arabic and Malayalam in different parts of India (Sardesai, 1985). Despite calls for script standardisation for writing Konkani language, all the five scripts are used and recognised. Hence there is development of the Konkani literature and language. So, it is crucial to stop the politics around Kokborok script as it adversely affects the development of Kokborok language. In such situations it is appropriate to keep the selection of script open or flexible. The students or the writers of Kokborok language may be allowed to write in whichever script they choose as long as they believe their thoughts and emotions are best articulated and represented.



<p style="text-align: center;"><b>A</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>NEP(Sem-1)/KB102C/23</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>UG Program (under NEP 2020)</b> <b>1st Semester Exam., 2023 (held in 2024)</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">KOKBOROK ( Major )</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Paper Code : KB102C</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Full Marks : 60 Time : 3 hours</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The figures in the margin indicate full marks for the questions</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>[ In Roman Script ]</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">GROUP—A</p> <p>1. Khamani swngmungrokni jeba kaidokni kok yachakdi : <span style="float: right;">2×6=12</span></p> <p>(a) 'Dongoi-no ringdi' koklop sabo swi tai a koklop bo kerang kothomano rwgwi swijakha?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">24M/430 <span style="margin-left: 100px;">( Turn Over )</span></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>B</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>( 5 )</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>[ In Bengali Script ]</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">GROUP—A</p> <p>১। খামানি সীংমুংরকনি জেবা কইদকনি কক য়াচকদি : <span style="float: right;">২×৬=১২</span></p> <p>(ক) 'দঙগয়-ন' রিঙদি' ককলপ সাব' সায় তাই আ ককলপ ব' কেগাকথমান' রাগাই সায়জাখা ?</p> <p>(খ) 'তিই-তুন' ককলপ সায়নাই সাব' তেই ব' বিসিয় কারিজাকখা ?</p> <p>(গ) 'গাক চিকন, মামি, মাইকরমরক জতন' গুলাঅ দউনৌ দিবো বাই হরইহ' ব' ককলপনি অ বীতাং ? দিবো তাম' ?</p> <p>(ঘ) 'কামিনি লামা' ককলপ' আচু বাই আচুই তাম' বীলাই তঙ হীনীয় সাজাখা ?</p> <p>(ঙ) 'খিরগাই ফাইবি' বীচাকমুঙ ককলপনাইনি প্রানজাদুসঙ ব' তালনি ব' সালমারিঅ নকনি নঙখরইই খাঙ ?</p> <p>(চ) 'উাসক সকা' তনালে মান' পানতীয়সে সীকাং লাইয়' উানামা ককন' সানাপে মান' মুকতীয়সে সীকাং লাইয়' ব' ককলপনি অ বীতাং ? 'উাসক সকা' তামন' হীন ?</p> <p>(ছ) ককলপনাই বুবাই দেববমী-নি খাইনীয় ককলপনি মুঙ তেই বিসি সায়দি।</p> <p style="text-align: right;">24M/430 <span style="margin-left: 100px;">( Turn Over )</span></p>
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**Figure 4.** A clipping of question paper of Kokborok (B.A.) 1st semester of Department of Kokborok, Ramthakur College, affiliated to Tripura University: A: Roman; B: Bengali script, 2024

Source: Department of Kokborok, Ramthakur College, Affiliated to Tripura University (2024)

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>A</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">PG/S-4/KB-1001C/2024</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>MA (4<sup>TH</sup> SEMESTER) EXAM., 2024</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">KOKBOROK <b>KB-1001C</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Full Marks: 70 Time: 2 hours</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The figures in the margin indicate full marks for the questions.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Answer to question No. 1 is compulsory and any five from the rest</i></p> <p>1. Tolani swngmungrokni kok phirokti. <span style="float: right;">5x2=10</span></p> <p>a) "Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, emotions recollected in" – soj swidi.</p> <p>i) Sensation: Wordsworth, ii) images: Wordsworth, iii) tranquility: Wordsworth</p> <p>b) Henry James tei Mr. Walter Besant khorokwini kothomayung sollaimani mung swidi?</p> <p>c) 'Natyashastra' swinaini mung tei bisi swidi.</p> <p>d) Acharya Bhamhni kok narwkmung thaisa swidi.</p> <p>e) Alangkamo twiwi khorokwi Acharyani mung tei jora swidi.</p> <p>2. Kavyano twiwi kok narwkmrokno khalwi swidi. <span style="float: right;">12</span></p> <p>3. Kavya Tatva tamo tei dalrokno cherwi swidi. <span style="float: right;">2+10=12</span></p> <p>4. Rasa eba Dhvani-ni kok narwkmung, dal tei phunukmarirokno phologwi swidi. <span style="float: right;">12</span></p> <p>5. Aristotleni tragedy tamo tei tragedyni elementrokno twiwi swidi. <span style="float: right;">12</span></p> <p>6. An Apology for poetry-ni koklobo koklopo kasumani kokrok swidi. <span style="float: right;">12</span></p> <p>7. Henry Jamesni khakamungrok bini "The Art of Fiction" bisingtwi swidi. <span style="float: right;">12</span></p> <p>8. William Wordsworthni khakamawni koklop swimani raida swidi. <span style="float: right;">12</span></p> <p>9. Kokpholokmung swidi. (Jeba thainwi) <span style="float: right;">2x6=12</span></p> <p>a) Kavya swarup, b) Kavya Prerana, c) Gun-Riti</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>B</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">PG/S-4/KB-1001C/2024</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>MA (4<sup>TH</sup> SEMESTER) EXAM., 2024</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">KOKBOROK <b>KB-1001C</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Full Marks: 70 Time: 2 hours</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The figures in the margin indicate full marks for the questions.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Answer to question No. 1 is compulsory and any five from the rest</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">(In Bengali Script)</p> <p>১। তোলনি সীংমুংরকনি কক ফিরকদি: <span style="float: right;">৫x২=১০</span></p> <p>ক) "Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, emotions recollected in" নই সইদি</p> <p>ি) sensation: Wordsworth, ii) images: Wordsworth, iii) tranquility: Wordsworth</p> <p>খ) Henry James তেই Mr. Walter Besant খরকনীয়ি কথমায়ুং সললামনি মুঙ সইদি।</p> <p>গ) 'Natyashastra' সিনাননি মুঙ তেই বিসি সইদি।</p> <p>ঘ) Acharya Bhamh-নি কক নারীকমুঙ থাসা সইদি।</p> <p>ঙ) Alankar-নি 'তাইই খরকনীয়ি Acharya-নি মুঙ সইদি।</p> <p>২। Kavya-ন' 'তাইই কক নারীকমুঙরকন' খানীয় সইদি। <span style="float: right;">১২</span></p> <p>৩। Kavya Tatva 'তাম' তেই দালরকন' চেইয় সইদি। <span style="float: right;">২+১০=১২</span></p> <p>৪। Rasa এৰা Dhvani-নি কক নারীকমুঙ, দাল তেই মুকুকাইরকন' ফনাইই সইদি। <span style="float: right;">১২</span></p> <p>৫। Aristotle-নি tragedy 'তাম' তেই tragedy-নি elementরকন' 'তাইইই সইদি। <span style="float: right;">১২</span></p> <p>৬। An Apology for poetry-নি ককলপ' ককলপন' ককলপনি ককরকন' সইদি। <span style="float: right;">১২</span></p> <p>৭। Henry James-নি খাকামুংরক বিনি "The Art of Fiction" বিগিঙতইই সইদি। <span style="float: right;">১২</span></p> <p>৮। William Wordsworth-নি খাকামাইনি ককলপ সায়মনি রাইদি সইদি। <span style="float: right;">১২</span></p> <p>৯। ককফলকমুঙ সইদি। (জেবা থাইনই) <span style="float: right;">২x৬=১২</span></p> <p>ক) Kavya swarup, খ) Kavya Prerana, গ) Gun-Riti</p>
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**Figure 5.** A clipping of question paper of Kokborok (M.A) under Tripura University: A: Roman Script; B: Bengali Script, 2024

Source: Tripura University, Department of Kokborok (2024)

### 3. Factors of Kokborok Language Movement

The factors of Kokborok language movement have been discussed through the lens of cultural hegemony, linguistic imperialism and linguisticism. Other factors include demographic shift, recognition of Bengali as an official



language, 1964, exclusion of Kokborok language in school, imposition of Bengali script, changing the place names etc.

### 3.1. Cultural Hegemony

The idea of cultural hegemony was given by Antonio Gramsci in his prison notebook. According to Gramsci (1971) cultural hegemony refers to the control of a culturally dominant group over others, where the dominant group's values and language become the societal norm, often to the detriment of minority cultures. In the case of Tripura cultural hegemony is manifested through the normalisation and use of Bengali language and culture such as customs, social norms, and religious beliefs etc., in everyday life of Boroks. In Tripura, the hegemony of the powerful dominant group also created culturally based social stratification of Bengali speakers and tribes in general and Kokborok speakers in particular, where the minority tribal communities are expected to follow the language and culture of the Bengali community.

### 3.2. Linguistic imperialism

The term linguistic imperialism was first used by Phillipson in 1992 in his book titled "Linguistic Imperialism". Linguistic imperialism being embedded in European ideology in general sense is a colonisation policy of powerful agents or rulers which brings cultural, political and economic subjugation to the colonised or dominated nations. History has proven that imperial powers have always portrayed themselves as the bearer of civilised culture while they stigmatised and suppressed the culture of the dominated people. In actual sense imperialism whether economic, political or linguistic is inextricably linked with racist ideology. According to Phillipson (1992), "tribe and dialect are two of the most central labels in colonist cultural mythology. He stated that they both express how the dominant group stigmatises and sets itself apart from the dominated group and therefore contribute to the racist ideology. He further stated that the rule is that we are a nation with a language whereas they are tribes with dialects" (p. 38). Although imperialism is generally associated with the colonial rule, it is still significant in the post-colonial era. In the introduction section, studies on the introduction of Bengali as the official language in Oriya and Assamese speaking areas during the colonial period have been discussed by Mohanty (2002) and Basid, (2016). Bengali assumed importance during the colonial period due to the location of British India capital in the Bengali dominated area. It was natural for British to unify the Bengal and adjoining areas with the use of Bengali language. The king of Tripura had a dual status of - a zamindar under the Nawab of Bengal and later the British administration in respect of plain Tripura in east Bengal and an independent King in respect of hill Tripura during the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Sur, 2010). It is likely that Bengali was adopted as a court language limited to the royal palace during the British time for better communication with Bengal administered plain Tripura. Therefore, Bengali became the primary language of administration during the monarchy. The use of Bengali language in the royal court and higher social circles represents the early example of linguistic imperialism of Bengali language and marginalisation of the Kokborok language. As a result, was relegated Kokborok to a local language with limited use and was excluded from administrative use, creating a structure where Bengali language became synonymous with the civilised society at least in the royal court. Perhaps the practice of using Bengali as court language continued after the independence specially post large-scale migration of Bengalis from east Bengal upgrading the status of Bengali as an official language and ultimately affecting the common Kokborok speaking people.

### 3.3. Linguicism

Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) defines linguicism as a system of beliefs, frameworks, and actions that justify, enforce, regulate, and sustain disparities in power and resource allocation, both tangible and intangible, among groups distinguished by their language, particularly their mother tongue. According to Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) Linguicism is language-based discrimination similar to racism, classism, sexism, and ageism that systematically creates and maintains unequal power relations between different language communities.

The ramifications of having one dominating group over other minority groups are linked to all the aforesaid concepts. Linguistic imperialism is more specific and focused on the dominance and imposition of one language over other which is regulated primarily through institutions and linguicism is more related with discrimination or unfair



treatment based on language at the individual or societal level whereas cultural hegemony is broader and discusses the overall dominance of one culture over the another, of which language is a part.

Apart from these factors there are numerous socio-political factors driving the Kokborok language movement which are discussed below:

### 3.4. Migration induced demographic shift

Following the mass migration of the Bengali speakers particularly post integration of Tripura with the Indian union, the proportion of the tribes and Kokborok speaking population reduced abruptly resulting into demographic shift from Kokborok speaking majority to Bengali speaking majority. This has contributed to the entrenchment of cultural hegemony, wherein the language and cultural practices of the dominant Bengali group became normalised as societal norms. The Bengali-speaking community developed a sense of cultural superiority as a result of the growing numerical and institutional dominance of Bengali speakers, particularly in administrative and urban spaces. This cultural superiority of Bengali speaking population further resulted into stigmatisation and marginalisation of Kokborok speakers which prompted formation of political and cultural organisations and culminated into Language development movement focused on protecting tribal identity and preserving the language from cultural and linguistic domination.

### 3.5. Recognition of Bengali as an official language, 1964

The Kokborok-speaking community, particularly TUJS, opposed the exclusive recognition of Bengali and pushed for Kokborok's inclusion as an official language, when the Tripura government enacted the Tripura Official Language Act in 1964, declaring Bengali as the state's official language. The deliberate exclusion of Kokborok in the official language act, 1964 by the government of Tripura reflects on the attempt of the government to institutionalise dominance and cultural hegemony of Bengali language by marginalising the languages of the tribes and undermining the identity and rights of Kokborok speakers and other tribal languages. Initially it was this deliberate exclusion of Kokborok that fuelled the Kokborok language development movement taking political colour later. [Marconi Debbarma \(2023\)](#) opined that the imposition of Bengali language and even Bengali script for writing Kokborok is an act of linguistic imperialism by the dominant Bengali speaking population in the state. The imposition of Bengali language over the tribes indeed indicates the interplay of linguistic imperialism and cultural hegemony of dominant and socio-economically powerful communities over the minority communities, demonstrating language as an instrument to establish political and cultural dominance.

The government's negligence is also apparent in its disregard for the recommendations made by the [State Reorganisation Commission](#) in 1955. The commission's report highlighted the need for administrative division of Indian states based on linguistic criteria. The commission suggested that a state should be classified as unilingual if a single language is spoken by 70 percent or more of its population. However, if speakers of a minority language constitute about 30 percent of the population, the state should be officially recognised as bilingual for administrative functions, ensuring the inclusion of minority languages. This approach implied that minority linguistic communities should not be marginalised, and states could adopt more than one official language to reflect their diverse linguistic landscape. In [Paul \(1967\)](#), the share of Bengali and Kokborok speakers was 65 per cent and 25 per cent respectively. Therefore, no single language constituted 70 per cent or more speakers. However, the Tripura official language acts, 1964 solely recognised Bengali language as the official language which reflects on the disregard of the government to develop the Kokborok and other minority languages.

### 3.6. Exclusion of Kokborok language in school

One of the major driving forces behind the Kokborok language movement was the educational marginalisation faced by Kokborok-speaking communities. The Kokborok speakers did not have access to formal education in their Mother Tongue for decades. Kokborok was introduced only in the late 1970s. Prior to the 1970s, Bengali was the principal medium of instruction (MOI) in the schools of Tripura, systematically removing the indigenous languages. This reflects linguisticism, which is enforced by the state resulting into linguistic inequalities and discrimination. This created feelings of alienation for the Kokborok speakers and limited their educational and socio-



economic opportunities. Thus, the Kokborok movement started as a resistance against this injustice in support of incorporating Kokborok into the educational system and acknowledging the linguistic identity of the indigenous people of Tripura.

### 3.7. Imposition of Bengali script

The demand for Roman script has been one of the major factors of Kokborok language movement. Despite the TUIS's advocacy for the Roman script since the 1960s Kokborok was written in the Bengali script when it was introduced in schools in the late 1970s. This imposition of the Bengali script illustrates the cultural hegemony of the Bengali-speaking majority, who enforced their linguistic practices on minority communities. The persistent use of Bengali script in school textbooks, signboards, notices etc., for writing Kokborok without formal mandate by the government exemplifies linguistic and cultural hegemony, as the practice of the dominant groups are implicitly legitimised disregarding the demands of Kokborok speakers.

### 3.8. Changing the place names

The renaming of places by the dominant cultures indicates power politics and an attempt to obliterate history of the dominated cultures. The renaming of places by the dominant group also reflects cultural hegemony. During the British period many place names were anglicised as per the preference and suitability of the rulers, indicating lower preference for the local language. For instance, the present-day Kolkata and Mumbai were then known as Calcutta and Bombay respectively. similar to Anglicisation of places name during the British rule, many places in Tripura have been altered primarily into Bengali names as well as mangled into names that have no sense either in Bengali nor in Kokborok language. Table 1 presents few examples of place names that have changed. The alteration of place names also signifies disregard for the indigenous Kokborok language. Although the alteration of place names is not the direct cause of the language movement it definitely caused dissatisfaction among the Boroks, which in a way fuelled the language development movement.

**Table 1.** List of altered places, rivers, mountains, monuments names

Original Names	Changed Name	Original Name	Changed Name
Hachwk-berem	Atharamura	Mwtai-Hathai	Debtamura
Loksuma	Khowai	Mayungtwisa	Hatichhara
Saidra	Haora	Mwswitwisa	Harincharra
Dondra	Dhalai	Twisarangchak	Sonachhara
Dongor/Dungur	Dumbur	Hokutwisa	Dumachhara
Subrai Hathai	Unakoti	Thokhatthai	Teliamura
Astabol math	Swami Vivekananda Stadium	Nuyungma	Ujjayanta Palace / Tripura State Museum
Victoria memorial Hospital	Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital	Aguli	Agartala
Durbar Ground	Children's Park	Mwtai Bari	Matarbari
Sumili	Sonai Gang	Khumpuilwng	Khupilong

Source: R. Debbarma (2021); Mousami Debbarma (2023)

## 4. Impacts of the Kokborok Language Movement

The Kokborok language movement brought several impacts in the development of the Kokborok language. The major impacts are discussed below:

### 4.1. Official Recognition

The language development resulted in the official recognition of Kokborok as one of Tripura's official languages on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1979. Although Kokborok gained official status, its use is not widespread. Additionally,



the Tripura official language rules, 1999 were not completely followed. The Tripura official Language rules, 1999 emphasise that any language either Bengali or Kokborok language along with English shall be used in: the replies to representations, petitions and communications from the government at the district level, language of noting and order in the state secretariat and heads of the Departments, offices, communication between the states and the districts, language of government notifications, orders, circulars, language of forms, statement, challan etc. The State government does not use Kokborok for notifications, circulars or any other communication. The consistent use of the Bengali language over Kokborok in government communication reflects on an unspoken prioritisation of the majority's linguistic identity over that of minority groups, subtly reinforcing a hierarchical cultural order. The incomplete implementation of the Tripura Official Language Rules, 1999 also reflects deeper socio political and administrative dynamics. Although the government policy has set framework for inclusivity, the real-world application of the policy depends on addressing structural barriers, cultural hegemony, and valuing all linguistic identities equally. Recognising Kokborok in practice, not just in policy, would symbolise a broader commitment to cultural equity and diversity.

#### 4.2. Introduction in Educational Institutes

The persistent demand by the indigenous population of the state culminated into introduction of Kokborok as a MOI in 1977-78 at the primary level in all government schools, particularly in TTAADC (Devy & Debbarma, 2016). After the introduction of Kokborok in Schools, the Kokborok Teachers (KBT) was recruited by the government of Tripura in the 1980s to enhance learning for the Kokborok speakers through the use of Kokborok language. In 2012 Kokborok was introduced as an elective subject in the government degree colleges. In 2015 Kokborok was introduced as a post-graduation department in Tripura University and as honours under graduate course in its affiliated colleges. The language was also offered as a language subject at the school level majorly in schools affiliated to TBSE and CBSE. However, Kokborok was only introduced in the CBSE schools in 2023.

It is impossible to overlook the role of institutions in generating the interest in learning Kokborok language. The introduction of Kokborok in Schools, Colleges and university sparked public interest due to employment opportunity attached to learning of the Kokborok language and ultimately contributing to the development of the language. However, it has been observed that majority of the schools that are not under the jurisdiction of TTAADC do not offer Kokborok as a language subject in their schools. It is so as less value is exerted on Kokborok language in the non-TTAADC areas of Tripura where Bengali speakers enjoy the absolute dominance. According to Skutnabb – Kangas (1988) in school education the dominant language speakers exert less value to minority mother tongues, a case of cultural linguicism and stress educational efforts geared towards the learning of the dominant language, a case of institutional linguicism. Therefore, despite being institutionalised in educational institutions, Kokborok is not widespread resulting to a limited scope in its development. In the present context, 783 primary schools use Kokborok as the MOI and 46 upper primary and high schools offer as a subject (Government of India, 2011; 2014). However, according to the 52<sup>nd</sup> report of the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities Kokborok is not used as the MOI at any level of schooling in Tripura (Government of India, 2016). Thus, despite its institutional recognition, the use of Kokborok remains restricted. Therefore, the Kokborok speaking communities demanded for introduction of Kokborok in educational institutions. The recent demands are related with its introduction in CBSE schools as a language subject which is receiving a positive attention as several CBSE affiliated schools have offered Kokborok as a subject.

#### 4.3. Formation of commissions and directorate

Sluggish development of Kokborok language is evident in the constitution of the Tribal Language Commission on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1996 after nearly 17 years, constitution of the Tripura Upajati Bhasha Commission on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2004, and establishment of a separate directorate of Kokborok & Other Minority Languages on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2012 to promote Kokborok and minority languages.

#### 4.4. Formation of non-governmental organisations

Apart from political organisations the development of Kokborok was significantly influenced by the literary organisations like the Kokborok Sahitya Sabha (KSS) formed in 1972 (Debbarma & Debbarma, 2016). *Hachukkhurio*



(In the Lap of Hills), the first modern Kokborok novel written by Sudhanya Debbarma, was published in 1987 by the KSS and Sanskriti Samsad. The formation of the Kokborok and Hukumu Mission (KHM), the Movement for Kokborok Language (MFK); which is a coalition of 26 Kokborok-speaking organisations established in 2004, significantly contributed to the growth and advancement of the Kokborok language. These organisations led to the development of Kokborok literatures further enriching the language and ultimately developing the language.

## 5. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion can be concluded in the following ways: Firstly, the movement for developing Kokborok language revolves around the demand for official recognition, wide implementation and resolution of script issue. Secondly, the movements have resulted into various key developments in gaining official status and its implementation in the educational institutes, however the script issue remains unresolved. Thirdly, the slow pace of development is primarily induced by politicising the issue and government not complying with the demand of the Kokborok speakers. Fourthly, language is a symbol of power and identity. Tripura's language movements demonstrate how linguistic policies serve to further entrench structural inequalities by reinforcing social hierarchies. The fact that initially only Bengali was recognised and implemented in educational institutions and government offices demonstrates that language serves as a tool for social and political control in addition to being a communication tool, where the dominance of one language leads to subjugation of other languages. The Kokborok speaker's resistance to the Bengali language and script and assertion to recognise and include Kokborok in the state's official language, its implementation in education symbolises more than just mere demands for linguistic equality; they also represent an assertion of cultural identity and autonomy. One such example of resistance and demand for autonomy in decision-making is the demand for Roman script against the government's idea to impose Bengali script on the Kokborok speakers. Lastly, the language development movement in Tripura offers an insight into the complex intricate web of linguistic imperialism and cultural hegemony, illustrating the use of language as a social and political tool of asserting the cultural supremacy over the minorities.

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### Acknowledgement

The authors gratefully acknowledge all the respondents, as well as the academic guidance and support received from the faculty and staff of the department during the research period.

### Funding Details

This work is part of PhD research work and was supported by the [Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Scholarship Division] under the scheme "National Fellowship and Scholarship for Higher Education of ST Students" under [Award number: 202021-NFST-TRI-01839].



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Yes

**Conflict of interest**

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

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