Reclaiming Indigenous Womanhood: Contribution of Female Poets in Modern Kokborok Literature

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***Abstract*—Modern Kokborok literature represents a significant shift from an exclusively oral cultural tradition to a written literary consciousness shaped by historical change, identity assertion, and linguistic self-respect. Within this evolving literary space, women poets have emerged as crucial voices articulating indigenous womanhood, emotional interiority, cultural memory, and subtle resistance. This article examines the contribution of three prominent female poets, Mj. Chandrabala Debbarma, Mj. Sefali Debbarma, and Mj. Dipali Debbarma, to modern Kokborok poetry. Through close thematic and stylistic analysis, the study highlights how their poetic works enrich Kokborok literature by foregrounding gendered experiences, ecological sensibility, and collective indigenous consciousness. The article argues that these poets play a decisive role in shaping modern Kokborok poetry as both a literary and cultural movement.**

***Index Terms*—Kokborok literature, women poets, indigenous poetry, Tripura, gender and culture, modern tribal literature.**

I. *INTRODUCTION*

Kokborok literature, rooted deeply in the oral traditions of the indigenous Tripuri communities of Tripura, has undergone a significant transformation in the modern period. While folk songs, ritual chants, myths, and narratives once served as the primary modes of cultural expression, the emergence of written Kokborok literature marked a new phase of literary self-awareness and identity formation. Poetry became the most vibrant and accessible genre in this transition, preserving oral rhythms while accommodating modern sensibilities.

Within this literary transformation, the contribution of female poets is both substantial and distinctive. Indigenous women poets writing in Kokborok articulate experiences that are often absent from dominant literary narratives, experiences shaped by domestic labour, emotional resilience, intimate engagement with nature, and cultural transmission. This article focuses on three significant female poets, Mj. Chandrabala Debbarma, Mj. Sefali Debbarma, and Mj. Dipali Debbarma and critically examines their role in enriching and expanding modern Kokborok poetry.

II. *WOMEN'S VOICES IN THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN KOKBOROK POETRY*

The emergence of women poets in Kokborok literature signifies a crucial epistemic shift, from collective, often anonymous oral expression to individual, authored poetic voices. For indigenous women, writing poetry becomes an act of self-representation and cultural affirmation. Their poems do not merely imitate dominant literary forms but reinterpret them through indigenous epistemologies grounded in land, kinship, memory, and everyday life.

Women poets contribute a layered sensibility to Kokborok poetry, where personal emotion intersects with collective cultural anxiety. Their works often resist overt political rhetoric, yet they perform a quiet form of resistance by documenting lived realities and asserting the dignity of indigenous womanhood through language.

III. *MJ. CHANDRABALA DEBBARMA: PIONEER OF EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND CULTURAL DOCUMENTATION*

Mj. Chandrabala Debbarma (b. February 01, 1960) was born at Gurudoyal Kami, Jompuijola, West Tripura. Professionally associated with All India Radio, Agartala, as a Kokborok announcer, she occupies a significant position in the cultural

dissemination of the Kokborok language. Her early exposure to written Kokborok literature during her school days played a decisive role in shaping her literary consciousness. Her first poem, *"Bharini Swtwi Muktwini Bwrwi Komornai khe Bini Bwtwi"*, written while she was a student of Class VI, reflects deep emotional sensitivity and an early awareness of linguistic identity.

During her school years, Chandrabala Debbarma also ventured into dramatic writing. While studying in Class IX, she authored and staged her first Kokborok drama, *Randasani Asati*, indicating her multifaceted engagement with creative expression. In addition to literature, she has shown keen interest in fine arts and was awarded second position in a state-level fine art competition, further reflecting her aesthetic sensibility.

As a poet, her works are characterized by emotional depth, introspection, and strong attachment to indigenous life-worlds. Over the years, her poems have been published in various Kokborok literary magazines such as *Chethuang* and *Bubagra*, contributing significantly to the enrichment of Kokborok literary culture. In her later phase, she expanded her literary engagement to biographical writing, documenting the lives of eminent personalities and women figures, thereby strengthening indigenous historiography.

Her published works include *Hili* (Poetry), *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar* (Biography), and *Hayungni Burwirok* (Selected biographies of famous women). Her long-standing association with the Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission further underlines her commitment to language development and cultural preservation. Through poetry, drama, biography, and translation, including her unpublished translation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Tota Kahini*, Chandrabala Debbarma emerges as a pioneering female voice who bridges creative literature and cultural documentation.

IV. *MJ. SEFALI DEBBARMA: LYRICAL VOICE OF NATURE AND INDIGENOUS SENSIBILITY*

Mj. Sefali Debbarma (b. February 03, 1964) was born at Pattabil, Ponchoboti, Simna, West Tripura. A homemaker by profession, she represents a powerful example of how indigenous women have contributed to literary culture while remaining rooted in domestic and community life. She began writing poetry casually around 1985 without any initial intention of publication. However, the broadcast of her poem on All India Radio, Agartala, in 1993 marked a turning point in her literary journey, after which she continued writing with consistency and dedication.

Her poems have been published in several Kokborok literary magazines and poetry collections, including *Chethuang*, *Bumul*, *Raima*, *Pahariya*, and *Anji*. Significantly, one of her poems was included in the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-East* published by the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, indicating national-level recognition of her poetic merit.

Sefali Debbarma's poetry is marked by lyrical simplicity, emotional subtlety, and deep ecological awareness. Nature, memory, and everyday indigenous experiences form the core of her poetic imagination. Without overt ideological assertion, her poems evoke a quiet strength that reflects women's emotional resilience within indigenous societies.

Her published poetry collections include *Hor Diboro Rwchapmung*, *Imangni Yakhrai Ninango*, and *Tal Kwchang Yorkhwlai Thango*. In recognition of her literary contribution, she was awarded the Salil Krishna Debbarma Smriti Puraskar in 2004 for *Imangni Yakhrai Ninango* and was felicitated by the Government of Tripura during the Silver Jubilee celebration of Kokborok Recognition Day in the same year. As a founding member of the Kokborok Sahitya Akademi, her role extends beyond authorship to institutional development of Kokborok literature.

V. *MJ. DIPALI DEBBARMA: PEDAGOGIC COMMITMENT AND LITERARY ACTIVISM*

Mj. Dipali Debbarma (b. July 27, 1966) was born at Bubon Chontai Kami, Jirania, West Tripura. Professionally engaged in teaching, she combines literary creativity with pedagogic responsibility. She began experimenting with Kokborok poetry as early as 1979, gradually developing fluency and stylistic confidence. Since 1982, she has written exclusively in Kokborok, demonstrating strong linguistic commitment at a time when indigenous languages faced marginalization in formal education.

Her poems have appeared in several Kokborok literary magazines and collections such as *Anji*, *Bumul*, and *Khumpui*. One of her poems, *Nuai*, was included in a Sahitya Akademi–translated volume, reflecting her contribution to the national literary space. Her engagement with educational literature is particularly significant; *Rangchhakni Tripura Ama* was developed as a Kokborok textbook for Class VIII, contributing directly to language pedagogy.

Her published book *Rikari*, focusing on Borok design, reflects her interdisciplinary approach that connects literature, visual culture, and indigenous aesthetics. With approximately sixty Kokborok poems ready for publication, her literary corpus continues to expand. Dipali Debbarma is actively associated with the Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission, the Borok Women Forum, and the Movement for Kokborok, positioning her not only as a poet but also as a literary activist committed to language rights and cultural continuity.

VI. *COLLECTIVE CONTRIBUTION TO MODERN KOKBOROK LITERATURE*

Together, Chandrabala Debbarma, Sefali Debbarma, and Dipali Debbarma represent a significant phase in the development of modern Kokborok literature. Their poetry collectively enriches the literary tradition by:

- Introducing gendered perspectives rooted in lived experience.
- Preserving indigenous cultural memory through lyrical expression.
- Expanding eco-poetic and emotional dimensions of Kokborok poetry.
- Asserting women's authorship and linguistic agency.

Their works demonstrate that modern Kokborok literature is not merely a literary movement but a cultural process shaped by diverse voices and experiences.

VII. *CONCLUSION*

The contribution of female poets to modern Kokborok literature is both transformative and enduring. Through poetry, Mj. Chandrabala Debbarma, Mj. Sefali Debbarma, and Mj. Dipali Debbarma articulates indigenous womanhood as a site of memory, resilience, and cultural continuity. Their works deepen the emotional and thematic range of Kokborok poetry while reinforcing the importance of indigenous language as a medium of self-expression.

Recognizing and critically engaging with women's poetic voices is essential for constructing a more inclusive and representative literary history of Kokborok literature. Future scholarship must continue to document, analyze, and foreground indigenous women's writing to ensure that modern Kokborok literature reflects the full diversity of its creative contributors.

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