

From Oral Tradition to Written Literature: Writing as A Means of Preserving and Revitalising the Kokborok Language

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Abstract—Kokborok, the principal Tibeto-Burman language of the Tiprasa people of Tripura, Northeast India, developed for nearly two millennia as a predominantly oral medium, sustaining an extensive repository of folktales, myths, proverbs, ritual chants, and songs. The absence of a stable, widely used script for most of its history left the language vulnerable to erosion under sustained contact with Bengali and, more recently, Hindi and English. This article examines how the transition from orality to writing—beginning with the earliest grammars of the 1890s, consolidated through the standardisation efforts of the Kokborok tei Hukumu Mission after 1993, and extended by contemporary digital and computational initiatives—has functioned as a strategic instrument of language preservation and revitalisation. Drawing on Fishman's theory of reversing language shift and Grenoble and Whaley's typology of revitalisation strategies, the article argues that writing does not merely record oral tradition but restructures the sociolinguistic ecology of a minority language by creating new domains of use, symbolic capital, and intergenerational transmission pathways. The persistent script controversy—between Bengali, Roman, and the historic Koloma script—is analysed as a site where questions of literacy, identity, and political recognition converge. The article concludes that a multi-pronged approach combining documentation of oral literature, script standardisation, institutional support, and digital corpus development offers the most viable path for securing Kokborok's long-term vitality.

Index Terms—Kokborok; oral tradition; language revitalisation; language shift; script standardisation; endangered languages; Northeast India; literacy

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is simultaneously a cognitive tool, a social practice, and an archive of collective memory. For communities whose linguistic heritage has been transmitted primarily through speech, the movement

toward a written tradition marks a profound transformation not simply in the technology of communication, but in the very structure of cultural transmission (Ong, 1982). Kokborok, also referred to as Tripuri, is the most widely spoken indigenous language of Tripura, a small hill state in Northeast India bordering Bangladesh. Classified within the Bodo-Garo branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family, Kokborok is spoken by close to 1.3 to 1.5 million people across Tripura, Assam, Mizoram, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (Nyalang & Debbarma, 2026). Despite its status as an official language of Tripura since 1979, Kokborok is classified as "vulnerable" in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (UNESCO, 2010), a designation that signals a slow but discernible erosion of intergenerational transmission under the pressure of dominant regional languages.

For most of its documented history, Kokborok existed almost exclusively as an oral language. Tradition holds that an indigenous script called Koloma was used during the reign of the Tripuri kings, but this script fell out of use after the fourteenth century and remains, in practical terms, lost to the present generation (Kokborok Day, n.d., as cited in local historiography; "Script issues of Kokborok", n.d.). Oral genres—myths of origin, agricultural songs, wedding chants, and the heroic ballads associated with the erstwhile Twipra kingdom—carried the community's history, cosmology, and social norms across generations without the mediation of writing. It was only at the close of the nineteenth century, with the publication of Radhamohan Thakur's grammar in 1900 and Doulat Ahmed and Mohammad Umar's Kokborma in 1897, that Kokborok began its slow migration into written form (Debbarma, 2026). This

article traces that migration and asks a central question: in what ways has writing functioned—and can it continue to function—as a deliberate strategy for preserving and revitalising a language whose vitality was, until recently, sustained almost entirely by oral transmission?

The article proceeds in six parts. Section 2 outlines the sociolinguistic and historical background of Kokborok. Section 3 examines the character and function of Kokborok's oral tradition and the pressures that render it vulnerable. Section 4 traces the historical emergence of written Kokborok literature and the enduring script controversy. Section 5 reviews institutional and policy interventions. Section 6 situates these developments within the theoretical literature on language revitalisation, and Section 7 considers contemporary digital extensions of the written tradition before the article concludes with recommendations for future practice.

II. HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC BACKGROUND OF KOKBOROK

Kokborok belongs to the Bodo-Garo subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman language family, a classification supported by comparative work on the broader Tibeto-Burman group (Bradley, 2002). The language is spoken across nine principal dialects named for the tribal communities that use them, including Debbarma, Reang, Jamatia, and Noatia, with the Debbarma variety historically serving as the prestige dialect used in teaching and literature (Jacquesson, 2008; Pai, 1976). Kokborok is a subject-object-verb (SOV) language with two phonemic tones and a system of verbal suffixes marking tense, and its vocabulary is richly elaborated for agriculture, kinship, ritual, and the natural landscape of the hills (Nyalang & Debbarma, 2026).

The Kingdom of Tripura, ruled by a line of Tripuri kings for more than two thousand years according to the dynastic chronicle known as the Rajmala, provided the political and cultural context within which Kokborok developed (Debbarma, 2026). Yet even the Rajmala itself illustrates the fragility of Kokborok's early written record: composed initially in the Tripuri language, it was ordered to be rewritten in Bengali under King Dharma Manikya in the fourteenth century, a decision that effectively erased the primary written trace of the language for the next five hundred

years ("Kokborok literature", n.d.). Bengali subsequently became the administrative and literary language of the Tripuri court, a pattern of diglossia that persisted through the colonial period and continues to shape the sociolinguistic hierarchy of the state today. The demographic and political landscape shifted markedly after India's independence and the partition of Bengal, when large-scale migration of Bengali-speaking refugees altered the ethnic composition of Tripura, reducing the indigenous Tiprasa population to a minority within their own state. This demographic transformation intensified pressure on Kokborok in education, administration, media, and public life, even as the language gained formal recognition.

The state government declared Kokborok an official language of Tripura on 19 January 1979, a milestone that led to its introduction into the school curriculum from the primary level and, subsequently, to certificate, undergraduate, and postgraduate programmes at Tripura University beginning in 1994 ("Kokborok", n.d.; Nyalang & Debbarma, 2026). Official recognition, however, did not resolve the more fundamental question of which script should carry the language into its written future—a question examined in Section 4.

III. ORAL TRADITION: FORMS, FUNCTIONS, AND VULNERABILITY

Before its written codification, Kokborok cultural knowledge was carried almost entirely through oral performance. Debbarma (2026) observes that oral literature "emerged alongside human speech" and functioned as an essential medium through which the Tiprasa community expressed its beliefs, values, and historical experience, with oral tradition occupying a central position within the broader history of Kokborok literary expression [Debbarma, 2026]. These oral forms included origin myths explaining the ancestry of the Borok people, seasonal and agricultural songs tied to the seven principal deities (Ka Chaturdasha Devata) worshipped in Tripuri tradition, courtship and wedding songs, laments, and narrative ballads recounting the exploits of kings and heroes. Riddles, proverbs, and children's rhymes formed a further layer of everyday oral culture through which linguistic competence and social values were transmitted from elders to the young.

This pattern is consistent with what has been documented more broadly for oral literatures in societies without a dominant written tradition: oral performance is not merely a deficient precursor to writing but a distinct mode of composition and transmission, shaped by mnemonic devices such as formulaic phrasing, repetition, parallelism, and communal performance context (Finnegan, 2012; Ong, 1982). Ong (1982) argues that oral cultures organise knowledge around concrete, situational, and participatory frameworks rather than the abstract, decontextualised structures that writing later makes possible—a distinction that helps explain why so much of Kokborok's early cosmological and historical knowledge survived as narrative and song rather than as chronicle or treatise.

The vulnerability of purely oral transmission, however, is well established in the sociolinguistic literature. Krauss (1992) warns that languages sustained only through spoken transmission are acutely exposed to disruption whenever intergenerational continuity is interrupted, whether through demographic change, out-migration, formal schooling in a dominant language, or the prestige economy that favours literate, state-sanctioned languages. In Tripura, all of these pressures converged in the twentieth century. As Bengali became the language of administration, commerce, and, increasingly, of the classroom, oral Kokborok literature risked being remembered only fragmentarily, carried by an ageing generation of tradition-bearers with few institutional mechanisms for its transcription or transmission to youth. It is precisely this vulnerability that gives urgency to the written turn discussed in the sections that follow: writing has offered a means of fixing oral material in a durable, reproducible, and transmissible form, even as it simultaneously changes the nature of the material it preserves.

IV. THE WRITTEN TURN: SCRIPT DEBATES AND LITERARY EMERGENCE

4.1 Early Grammars and the Beginnings of Written Kokborok

The formal history of written Kokborok literature is generally dated to 1897, with the publication of Kokborma, a grammatical text authored by Doulat Ahmad and Mohammad Umar (Debbarma, 2026).

Three years later, in 1900, Radhamohan Thakur published a fuller grammar of the language, followed by the Kokborok-Bengali-English translation work Traipur Kothamala in 1906 and Traipur Bhasabidhan in 1907 ("Kokborok literature", n.d.). These works, produced using the Bengali script that had already become entrenched through centuries of court usage, mark the point at which Kokborok began to be systematically fixed on the page rather than transmitted solely through speech and memory. The first academic descriptive grammar in the modern linguistic tradition, Pushpa Pai's Kokborok Grammar, was published considerably later by the Central Institute of Indian Languages (Pai, 1976), followed by François Jacquesson's short structural analysis (Jacquesson, 2003) and his more comprehensive grammar of the Agartala dialect (Jacquesson, 2008).

4.2 The Script Controversy: Bengali, Roman, and Koloma

The choice of script has remained the single most contested issue in the modernisation of written Kokborok. Three competing options have structured the debate. The Bengali script carries the weight of historical precedent, having been used in the Twipra kingdom's administrative and religious writing since at least the nineteenth century and remaining the medium of instruction in most schools ("Script issues of Kokborok", n.d.). The Roman (Latin) script, by contrast, was popularised during the colonial period and has since the early 1990s been actively promoted by tribal organisations and, notably, by Christian missionary translation work, including early Kokborok Bible translations ("Kokborok script twiwi jwngjal", n.d.). Its proponents argue that the Roman script better represents Kokborok phonology, is easier for children to learn without the interference of Bengali-medium literacy, and offers superior compatibility with digital keyboards, search engines, and natural language processing tools. The Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council formally adopted the Roman script for schools under its jurisdiction in 1992 and again in 2000 ("Script issues of Kokborok", n.d.).

The third option, revival of the indigenous Koloma script once used by the Tripuri kings, occupies a more symbolic register: its proponents frame script revival as an act of decolonisation and cultural reclamation, restoring a marker of pre-colonial sovereignty even

though the script's practical mastery among the population remains negligible and its revival is still "in process" ("Kokborok Day", n.d.). The persistence of this three-way tension—continuing into the 2020s with a state-wide strike by the Twipra Students' Federation and the constitution of a Government of Tripura Script Selection Committee in June 2023—demonstrates that the choice of script is never a purely technical matter [Tripurainfo, 2023]. It is inseparable from questions of political recognition, educational access, religious affiliation, and ethnic identity.

4.3 The Growth of Written Literary Genres

Despite the unresolved script question, written Kokborok literature expanded substantially over the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Formation of the Tripura Kokborok Unnayan Parishad in 1967 under Bir Chandra Deb Barma, and the subsequent publication in 1972 of Tripura Kokborok Bhashar Likhito Rupe Uttaran ("The Transformation of the Tripura Kokborok Language into Written Form"), signalled a deliberate, organised effort to move the language decisively into literacy [Kokborok literature, n.d.]. Poetry emerged first as the dominant written genre, given its closer affinity with the pre-existing oral song tradition; prose fiction developed later and more slowly. According to Debbarma's (2026) survey of the Kokborok novel, the first novel-length prose work appeared in the literary magazine Kwtal Kothoma under Sudhanwa Debbarma, and subsequent decades produced a small but steadily growing corpus, including Shyamlal Debbarma's *Khong* (1996) and Tongthai Naitugwi (2007), Biswa Kumar Debbarma's *Ostinogo* (2000), and Nanda Kumar Debbarma's *Rung* (2001) and *Bubagwrasa* (2018). Nanda Kumar Debbarma, playwright, poet, and president of the Kokborok Sahitya Sabha, has been among the most prolific and publicly recognised figures in this literary movement, alongside poets such as Bikashrai Debbarma, whose 2021 collection *Tutankhamun ni Pyramid* received the Doulat Ahmed Award. Recent scholarship, including Lalkulhpuia's (2023) study of Kokborok folktales, poetry, and fiction as "voices from below," situates this literary corpus within a broader project of cultural reclamation against the marginalisation of tribal narratives in mainstream Indian literature.

A defining feature of this emergent literature is its continued, self-conscious dialogue with oral sources.

Novelists and poets frequently draw directly on folk motifs, oral formulae, and communal memory, producing what Lalkulhpuia (2023) characterises as a literature that reclaims cultural heritage precisely by transposing oral material into durable written form. In this sense, the written tradition in Kokborok does not displace orality so much as it re-mediate it, extending the reach of oral content into contexts—school curricula, printed anthologies, newspapers, and now digital archives—that oral performance alone could not access.

V. INSTITUTIONAL EFFORTS AND LANGUAGE PLANNING

Organised institutional support has been decisive in converting individual literary effort into a sustained movement. The Kokborok tei Hukumu Mission (KOHM), founded in Agartala on 10 August 1993 as a non-political, non-religious cultural organisation, has served as the single most influential institution in this process, coordinating standardisation of spelling and orthography, publishing more than three dozen titles, and producing the widely used Anglo-Kokborok-Bengali Dictionary compiled by Binoy Debbarma, whose second edition appeared in 2002 (Debbarma, 2002; "Kokborok tei Hukumu Mission", n.d.). KOHM members have also broadcast Kokborok-language programming on All India Radio, Agartala, since April 1995, extending the language's public presence beyond print into electronic media, and have presented Kokborok-related research at international linguistics symposia in Thailand and Vietnam ("Kokborok tei Hukumu Mission", n.d.). State-level language planning has complemented these grassroots efforts. Official recognition in 1979 was followed by incorporation of Kokborok into the school syllabus, the introduction of a certificate course at Tripura University in 1994, a postgraduate diploma in 2001, a full undergraduate degree from 2012, and a Master of Arts programme from 2015 ("Kokborok", n.d.). More recently, the Government of Tripura's Tribal Research and Cultural Institute constituted a dedicated Script Selection Committee in June 2023 to evaluate and recommend a standard script for the language, an initiative explicitly framed as securing the language's "preservation and growth" [Tripurainfo, 2023]. Taken together, these interventions illustrate what Fishman (1991) describes as the necessity of

institutionalising a threatened language across successive domains—education, media, government, and organised civil society—if intergenerational transmission is to be secured rather than left to informal or incidental exposure.

VI. WRITING AS A REVITALISATION STRATEGY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Kokborok case offers a productive site for testing general theories of language revitalisation against a specific, still-unfolding trajectory. Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) conceptualises language endangerment as a matter of degree, ranging from languages still transmitted informally within the family (the most secure stage) to those used only by isolated elderly speakers (the most endangered). Applying this framework, Kokborok occupies an intermediate position: it retains substantial numbers of speakers and formal institutional support, yet faces erosion in informal intergenerational transmission as younger, urbanising Tigrasa families shift toward Bengali, Hindi, or English in daily life and as intermarriage and internal migration weaken village-based oral networks.

Where Fishman's framework emphasises the reconstruction of intergenerational, largely oral transmission within the home and community, Grenoble and Whaley (2006) broaden the analytic lens to consider the full range of strategies available to endangered-language communities, including documentation, immersion education, literacy development, and the creation of new textual domains such as newspapers, literature, and broadcasting. Writing, in this expanded framework, performs several distinct revitalising functions for Kokborok. First, it provides an archival function, fixing oral genres that would otherwise depend on the memory of a shrinking pool of elder tradition-bearers; the transcription and publication of folktales and songs by KOHM and by university departments exemplifies this documentary role. Second, writing enables a pedagogical function, allowing Kokborok to be taught systematically in schools and universities through textbooks, grammars, and dictionaries—an infrastructure that purely oral transmission cannot supply at scale. Third, writing performs a status-elevating function: the existence of a standardised, printed literature signals to speakers and to the wider

polity that Kokborok is a language of literature and scholarship, not merely a spoken vernacular, thereby countering the diglossic hierarchy that has historically privileged Bengali (Hinton & Hale, 2001).

This is not to suggest that writing is a costless or ideologically neutral intervention. Ong (1982) cautions that the shift from orality to literacy restructures cognition and social organisation, and in the Kokborok context, the very act of committing oral material to a particular script inevitably privileges the phonology, dialect, and cultural framework of whichever community controls the standardisation process—typically the prestige Debbarma dialect. The unresolved script controversy discussed in Section 4.2 can thus be understood, in Fishman's (1991) terms, as a struggle over which written form of the language will carry the symbolic authority to represent Kokborok as a whole, and, in Hinton and Hale's (2001) terms, as a struggle over who controls the practical infrastructure of revitalisation. A revitalisation strategy centred on writing therefore requires deliberate, community-informed governance of standardisation decisions if it is to avoid reproducing internal hierarchies even as it addresses external language shift.

VII. CONTEMPORARY LITERARY PRODUCTION AND DIGITAL EXTENSIONS

The written tradition established over the twentieth century has, in the past decade, extended into digital and computational domains that carry both new opportunities and new risks for Kokborok's vitality. Kokborok-language blogs, social media pages, and online literary platforms have emerged as informal but active sites of written production, particularly among younger speakers who favour the Roman script for its compatibility with standard keyboards. At the same time, the language's absence from mainstream natural language processing has begun to be addressed: early morphological analysers and part-of-speech taggers achieved moderate accuracy on Kokborok text (Nyalang & Debbarma, 2026), and the Kokborok language has been included in the WMT Low-Resource Indic Language Translation shared task since 2023, providing the first published machine-translation baselines for the language. Building on this foundation, Nyalang and Debbarma (2026) developed KokborokMT, a neural machine translation system fine-tuned on a corpus of more than 36,000 sentence

pairs that substantially improved translation quality between English and Kokborok and introduced a dedicated language token for Kokborok within a major multilingual translation framework.

Such developments matter for revitalisation because, as Grenoble and Whaley (2006) observe, a minority language's presence—or absence—in digital infrastructure increasingly determines its perceived relevance to younger generations, for whom digital literacy is often the primary literacy.

A Kokborok that can be typed, searched, translated, and read online extends the domains in which the language is used beyond the classroom and the printed page into precisely the spaces where young Tiprasa speakers already spend much of their time. At the same time, the reliance of current machine-translation systems on Bible-derived and synthetic back-translated data reflects the continuing scarcity of authentic, community-produced Kokborok text, underscoring that documentation of oral literature and expansion of original written composition remain foundational to any digital revitalisation effort, rather than a substitute for it.

VIII. CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several challenges temper the otherwise encouraging trajectory traced in this article. First, the unresolved script question continues to fragment the corpus of written Kokborok across Bengali and Roman orthographies, complicating textbook production, digital tool development, and cross-generational readability. Second, dialectal standardisation around the prestige Debbarma variety risks alienating speakers of Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, and other dialects, potentially narrowing rather than broadening the base of active literacy. Third, the volume of authentic written and digitised oral material remains small relative to the scale needed to sustain robust educational materials, corpus linguistics, and language technology, a gap reflected in the reliance of recent computational work on translated rather than originally composed Kokborok text (Nyalang & Debbarma, 2026). Fourth, informal intergenerational transmission in the home—still, per Fishman (1991), the most reliable foundation for long-term language vitality—cannot be replaced by institutional literacy

alone and requires complementary family- and community-based language planning.

On the basis of the preceding analysis, four recommendations follow. First, systematic, community-led documentation of remaining oral genres—myths, songs, ballads, and ritual speech—should be prioritised while active tradition-bearers remain available, following the archival logic outlined by Grenoble and Whaley (2006). Second, the ongoing work of the Government of Tripura's Script Selection Committee should be pursued toward a transparent, linguistically informed, and broadly consultative resolution, since continued orthographic fragmentation undermines every other revitalisation effort. Third, investment in Kokborok-medium and Kokborok-inclusive education should be expanded beyond the certificate-to-postgraduate university pipeline already in place, into stronger primary-level literacy instruction and teacher training. Fourth, digital infrastructure development—corpus building, machine translation, and text-to-speech systems—should be pursued in close partnership with the institutions, such as KOHM and the Department of Kokborok at Tripura University, that already hold the community's literary and oral heritage, ensuring that technological development remains accountable to community priorities rather than proceeding independently of them.

IX. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of Kokborok from a predominantly oral language to one increasingly supported by a written literary and institutional infrastructure illustrates both the power and the complexity of writing as a revitalisation strategy for an endangered indigenous language. Writing has allowed Kokborok's oral heritage—its myths, songs, and communal memory—to be fixed, taught, and disseminated in ways that oral transmission alone could no longer guarantee under the sociolinguistic pressures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. At the same time, the persistent controversy over script choice, the risk of dialectal homogenisation, and the still-limited corpus of authentic written material demonstrate that writing is not a self-executing solution but a contested and ongoing social process. For Kokborok to be genuinely revitalised rather than merely documented, the written tradition must remain closely tethered to its oral

wellspring, guided by community institutions such as the Kokborok tei Hukumu Mission and Tripura University, and extended deliberately into the educational, print, and digital domains where the language's next generation of speakers will decide its future.

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