



An Overview of the History of Kokborok Novels

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ABSTRACT:

A Novel is a special literary creation in which the author's philosophy and feelings of life are transformed into a descriptive work of art based on a real story. It reflects the entire life and therefore has a broad background. A comprehensive form, a consistent sequence of events, an interesting plot, distinctive character development, captivating narrative style, fluent dialogue, etc. are the characteristics of a successful novel. If we analyze the natural characteristics of a novel, it will be seen that the narration of a single story is the main thing in it. Along with the narration of the events of human life, the author's diverse understanding of the world and life is revealed in the novel.

Keywords: Kokborok, Kokborok Literature, Novel, Kokborok Novel.

INTRODUCTION:

Kokborok is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Indian state of Tripura and in neighboring areas of Bangladesh. It is one of the ancient languages of Northeast India. The term "Kokborok" was first introduced by Radhamohan Thakur in his book *Kok-borok-ma*, published in 1900. Kokborok is one of the most widely spoken languages among the nineteen (19) tribes of Tripura. The Kokborok language received recognition as a state language on January 19, 1979. It was later declared the official language of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) on April 20, 1999.

The teaching of Kokborok began at the primary school level in the 1980s. A three-month Certificate Course in Kokborok was initiated at Tripura University (Centre for Tribal Language) in 1994, followed by a one-year Postgraduate Diploma course in 2002. Over time, university offerings were expanded with the introduction of a foundation course in 2011. By 2012, Kokborok was included as an elective course in the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree programme, and a Postgraduate or Master of Arts (M.A.) course was introduced in 2015. In 2018, a Ph.D. programme in Kokborok was launched. Kokborok is the mother tongue of several Kokborok-speaking communities, namely the Debbarma, Tripura, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Kalai, Rupini, Murasingh, and Uchoi.

OBJECTIVES

1. To know about the kokborok speakers of Tripura.
2. To trace the origin and early development of novels written in the Kokborok language.

3. To examine the socio-cultural and historical factors that influenced the emergence of Kokborok novels.
4. To identify major Kokborok novelists and their significant contributions to Kokborok literature.
5. To analyze the thematic evolution of Kokborok novels from their inception to the present period.
6. To understand the role of Kokborok novels in preserving indigenous identity, traditions, and social issues.
7. To assess the growth, challenges, and future prospects of Kokborok novel writing.

METHODOLOGY:

Data for this writing has been collected through secondary source; data have been collected by taking reference from books related to the paper written by writer Nanda Kumar Debbarma, Rabindra Kishore Debbarma and Naresh Chandra Debbarma, Tarini Debbarma and Dipra Kishore Debbarma.

Kokborok Literature:

Kokborok, the language comprising nine dialects of the Tiprasa people of Tripura, India, began its written legacy with notable efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's. The earliest endeavours to formalize Kokborok in written form date back to the turn of the twentieth century and are characterized by the pioneering works of individuals such as Daulot Ahmed and Mohammed Umor in 1897–98, and Radhamohan Thakur in 1900. Radhamohan Thakur authored Kok-Borokma, a seminal grammar book that laid the groundwork for future literary endeavours. His subsequent works, including Troipur Kothamala and Troipur Bhasabidhan, further enriched the language's literary landscape. Contemporary with Radhamohan Thakur, Daulot Ahmed, along with Mohammed Umor, also contributed significantly to Kokborok grammar through the publication of Kokborma Ong Tripura Byakaron in 1897–98.

The mid-twentieth century witnessed a spiritual infusion into Kokborok literature when Khushi Krishna, a disciple of Ratanmani, compiled thirty-three spiritual songs in Kokborok, published under the title Tripura Kha-Khachangma Khumbar Boi in 1942. On December 27, 1945, the Jono Shiksha Samiti was established at Durga Chaudhuri Para. This organization was founded by a group of educated Tiprasa youths with the primary aim of spreading education among the backward tribal communities. Within a short period, the ideals of the Jono Shiksha Samiti spread widely, leading to the establishment of approximately 488 primary schools in various remote areas of the state under the supervision of its leaders. Through constructive activities such as promoting educational awareness and eliminating social prejudices, the leaders of the Jono Shiksha Samiti came to be regarded as ideal figures in society within a few years.

The founding president of the Jono Shiksha Samiti, the late Sudhanwa Debbarma, published the first Kokborok literary magazine in 1954, titled Kwtal Kothoma. This publication marked the debut of many writers, including Dashrath Debbarma, Jyotilal Debbarma, Ratiranjana Debbarma, Manik Debbarma, Rabirung Devi, Nabalakshmi Debbarma, Rabindra Debbarma, Mahendra Debbarma, Aghore Debbarma, Ramcharan Debbarma, Brajakumar Debbarma, Pulin Debbarma, Jagat Debbarma, Manmohan Debbarma, Purna Debbarma, Jogendra Debbarma, and others. The public education movement not only awakened the hill communities of the state to a new consciousness but also inspired urban intellectuals to express their individuality in new ways. In this spirit, writers such as Bongshi Thakur (Amarendra Debbarma), Jitendra Thakur (Advisor), Sudhir Krishna Debbarma, Ajit Bandhu Debbarma, Mahendra Debbarma, and others took up the pen.

Kokborok Novel:

In Kokborok literature, when it comes to Kokborok Novels, the name of Sudhanwa Debbarma comes first. Sudhanwa Debbarma is not only a pioneer in editing and publishing the first Kokborok literary magazine 'Kwtal Kothoma', but also a pioneer in writing novels in Kokborok literature. His first Kokborok novel 'Chethuang (Chatim Gach)' was serially published in 'Kwtal Kothoma', edited by himself, in 1956. This novel is based on a popular folktale 'Chethuang (Chatim Gach)'. It is a social and political novel focusing on the medieval social life of the Tiprasa prople of Tripura. In the original folktale, a brother wishes to marry his sister. Despite the sisters strong opposition to such a proposal which goes against social norms and the opposition of her parents and relatives, the brother remains steadfast in his decision. As a result, the sister climbs the Chethuang (Chatim Gach) tree and either ascends to the sky or commits suicide. The author has incorporated this element of the Chethuang folktale into his novel. In the original folktale 'Chethuang', there are no names for the hero and heroine nor is there any mention of a king or war. However, for the sake of the Novel, the author has introduced names for the hero and heroine and included reference to a king and war.

The subject of the novel Chethuang is set during the reign of Maharaja Chengtungpha of Tripura. Under Maharaja Chengtungpha, Tugan Khan was a feudal lord. Tugan Khan lodged a complaint against Chengtungpha with the then Nawab of Bengal and, with the Nawab's support, declared war against him. The Maharaja preferred peace over war, but Maharani Tripureshwari opposed this decision and herself went to war against the rebel Tugan Khan. Eventually, Maharaja was forced to join the war, which he ultimately won the war.

In this war, the hero Nugurai and the heroine Kormoti of the novel 'Chethuang' become involved. Kormoti wished to become a swayambara. Her grandfather arranged this, setting the condition that whoever could remove the thorns from the 'Khangrang' fruit would receive a garland from Kormoti. However, no one was able to fulfil this condition. Consequently, her grandfather fixed another day for a test of strength. Nugurai was confident that he would pass the test and win the beautiful Kormoti. However, before this could happen, war broke out in the kingdom. When Maharaja Chengtungpha declared war against Tugan Khan, Kormoti's swayambhara was interrupted. Nugurai and the other rival youths went to war.

After the war ended, Nugurai returned to find that Kormoti's self-immolation had been disrupted. Her own brother wanted to marry her, causing widespread social unrest. Kormoti strongly opposed the idea and, to preserve herself respect, committed suicide by climbing a Chethuang (Chatim) tree. This incident drove Nugurai mad, and he began wandering from country to country. After a long fifty to sixty years, Nugurai returned in the guise of a monk and took shelter beneath the Chethuang (Chatim) tree where his beloved Kormoti had ended her life. Sitting beneath the tree, Nugurai narrated stories of the past to the younger generation. This is where the novel 'Chethuang' ends.

Sudhanwa Debbarma's second novel is 'Hachuk Khurio (At the Crag of the Mountains)'. The novel is divided into four parts. The first, second and third parts have been published in book form. The fourth part has been published in the 6th year, 13th issue (October-December, 2007) of the Kokborok literary magazine 'Raima' of the Information, Culture and Tourism Department of the Government of Tripura. The Bengali translation of all the four parts was published together by Akshar Publications, Agartala, in 2004. A compact Kokborok edition of the complete Novel was published in 2014, by the Language wing of the Education Department, TTAADC, Khumulwng Tripura.

The novel 'Hachuk Khurio-' can be considered a comprehensive examination of tribal society and life in the state. On the one hand, it portrays the transition from monarchy to democracy and the shift of hill tribes from

Jhum cultivation to plain agriculture; on the other hand, it depicts the influx of outsiders into hilly Tripura, the resulting land crisis, and the emergence of new relationships between tribal people and outsiders. The social, economic and political disruptions affecting tribal society are vividly reflected in the novel. The traditional Jhum-based way of life collapses, and new class divisions gradually emerge. With the shift to plain agriculture, distinctions among middle peasants, poor peasants, and landless jhumias become evident.

The movement for public education creates new consciousness within tribal society, leading to the rise of nationalist movements and efforts to build a self-reliant community. All these developments are narrated in the novel. In the hill village of Mwtai Dongor, where the novel is set, characters such as Bhoktomoni, Mangal Sardar, and Gangacharan are middle-class farmers; Bodhrai, the father of the protagonist Naren, and Harjoy, Mongol Sardar's brother-in-law, are poor farmers; and Dukhiya and Phatung Diyari are landless jhumias. As they move to the plains, land disputes increase. Ultimately, Mwtai Dongor Para is divided into two parts over a land dispute between Mongol Sardar and Gangacharan, coinciding with the festival of Ker Puja.

Bodhrai mortgages land and a cow to educate his son in Agartala. Phatung Diyari's group migrates to Dhumchhara in search of cheaper land. Meanwhile, Naren's friend Bimal establishes a modern collective farm during this transitional phase from jhum to plain agriculture. Alongside these changes, a group of brokers emerges for the rehabilitation of jhumias, led by Bharat Chandra, the grandson of Bhoktomoni. Bharat Chandra frequently appears in court alongside Birmani, a Kachhari broker. Amidst these socio-economic tensions, Naren completes his medical education through public education and becomes deeply involved in nationalist and proletarian communist ideologies.

A contrast is drawn between the socio-economic condition of the hill tribes and that of the Thakur people of Agartala. Despite the end of the monarchy, the Thakurs remain directionless and cling to a false sense of nobility due to their past association with feudal lords. They continue to belittle the tribal people. When Naren stays at Gupen Thakur's house in Agartala, he witnesses this behaviour. Gupen Thakur's wife, Chandra Mallika, insults Naren by calling him a "mountain Tipra" over a trivial matter. Her daughter Mita protests against her mother's abuse, highlighting the injustice of her behaviour. Although Chandra Mallika initially reacts angrily, the novel exposes the hollowness of such false pride. Despite their claims of superiority, the Thakur family struggles economically, often lacking even basic necessities. To conceal their hardship, they engage in exaggerated displays of status. Nevertheless, they oppose the public education movement by forming the Tripura Sangha, even though they later benefit from the same movement by gaining employment.

Some readers and critics argue that the novel contains excessive political content. However, this criticism overlooks the fact that Hachuk Khurio portrays approximately forty years of social, economic, and political transformation in tribal society—from the 1950s to the 1980s. Written partly during the author's imprisonment in Hazaribagh Jail in 1962, the novel reflects the emergence of the Jono Shiksha Samiti, the rise of communist ideology, the formation of the Tripura Upajati Yuva Samiti (TUJS), and the evolution of nationalist movements. These ideological shifts are reflected through slogans and characters such as Sumonto, Dasharam, Durvasa, and others, making the narrative historically authentic.

After Sudhanwa Debbarma, Shyamalal Debbarma emerged as a significant Kokborok novelist. His first novel, Khong, published in 1996, serves as a social mirror of contemporary Kokborok-speaking society in Tripura. The novel portrays the fragmented reality of tribal society through its protagonist, Birchandra Tripura, an educated reformer who seeks modernization while preserving tradition. His ideological conflict with Christian converts advocating Roman script over Bengali script reflects a sensitive cultural debate. Shyamalal Debbarma presents these issues impartially and realistically.

A nature-loving poet, Shyamalal Debbarma infuses Khong with vivid natural imagery. Birchandra's love for Naithokti, set against the backdrop of jhum cultivation, is a masterpiece of Kokborok literary expression. While Hachuk Khurio is dialogue-oriented, Khong is deeply rooted in nature, making it a priceless treasure of Kokborok literature.

Shyamalal Debbarma's second novel, Tongthai Naitugwi (In Search of Shelter), published in book form in 2007, was earlier serialized in Lama from 1987 to 1992. The novel explores changing customs, traditions, and lived experiences within tribal society, weaving together scattered life stories into a cohesive narrative.

Nanda Kumar Debbarma's novel Rung (Boat), published in 2001, depicts the immense suffering of tribal people displaced by the construction of the Dumbur Dam. The once-fertile Raima-Sarma valley was submerged, uprooting hundreds of families and destroying their livelihoods. Bhuvan Roaja, a displaced elder, clings to memories of his joyful past, which the younger generation dismisses as madness. Yet these memories remain his refuge, reflecting the deep emotional cost of displacement.

After that, many other Kokborok Novels have been published up to 2023-24, which will be listed chronologically below:

Sl. No.	Name of the Novel	Writer's Name	Publishing Year
1	Chethuwang	Sudhanwa Debbarma	1956
2	Hachuk Khurio-I	Sudhanwa Debbarma	1987
3	Khong	Shyamlal Debbarma	1996
4	Rung	Nanda Kumar Debbarma	2001
5	Mwnakni Pohor	Kunju Bihari Debbarma	2002
6	Langmani Rukungo	Sunil Debbarma	2003
7	Halok	Kunja Bihari Debbarma	2003
8	1980	Atul Debbarma	2005
9	Tongthai Naitugwi	Shyamlal Debbarma	2007
10	Gora (Kok Swlaijak)	Laxmidhan Murashing	2007
11	Dolai Twima Naro	Bijoy Debbarma	2008
12	Lokhopoti	Sefali Debbarma	2010
13	Athuk (Kok Swlaijak)	Naresh Chandra Debbarma	2014
14	Hohr Bocholong (Kok Swlaijak)	Snehamoy Roy Chowdhury	2014
15	Khorang Bukcha Khalwng	Sefali Debbarma	2015
16	Yakung Kachiksa Ha (Kok Swlaijak)	Laxmidhan Murashing	2015
17	Khapangni Mari	Prabir Kumar Debbarma	2016
18	Hamjakmungni Hachuk	Sefali Debbarma	2016
19	Bubagwrasa	Nanda Kumar Debbarma	2018
20	Sokorom	Chandramani Debbarma	2020
21	Langmani Khorang	Biswajit Debbarma	2022
22	Sannyasi Raja (Kok Swlaijak)	Rabindra Kishore Deb Barma	2022
23	Khoroksale Bekereng Khosawanw	Kiran Debbarma	2022
24	Sampari	Kiran Debbarma	2023
25	Nakarmung	Andrew Debbarma	2023
26	Mungkwrwi (Volume-I)	Dr. Atul Debbarma	2023-24
27	Dungur Bano 5g	Dr. Atul Debbarma	2023-24
28	Bai Chakti	Matilal Jamatia	2023

Common Themes of Kokborok Novel

Following Hachuk Khurio, more writers began contributing novels in Kokborok. Although detailed lists of all titles are dispersed across literary sources, the genre steadily grew during the 1990s and 2000s, producing works that engage with themes such as:

1. Indigenous identity.
2. Social change and modernization.
3. Cultural preservation.
4. Nature and Agricultural Life.
5. Everyday life in Tripura.

By the early 21st century, around thousands of books—including novels, poetry collections, short story, anthologies, and essays—had been published in Kokborok, reflecting a maturing literary scene.

Significance of Kokborok Novel:

1. Cultural Preservation: Novels encapsulate language, customs, and worldview, helping preserve cultural memory for future generations.
2. Linguistic Development: Fiction has driven language standardization and creative expression beyond educational or religious texts.
3. Literary Recognition: Kokborok literature, including novels, has gained visibility through awards, academic study, and literary events.

FINDINGS

1. Late but Meaningful Emergence of the Kokborok Novel: Compared to poetry and folklore, the novel as a literary genre appeared relatively late in Kokborok literature. Its emergence in the mid-20th century, beginning with Sudhanwa Debbarma's Chethuang (1956), marks a crucial transition from oral and short written forms to extended prose narratives.

2. Pioneering Role of Sudhanwa Debbarma: Sudhanwa Debbarma is identified as the foundational figure in Kokborok novel writing. His novels Chethuang and Hachuk Khurio established the structural, thematic, and ideological framework for later Kokborok novels. Particularly, Hachuk Khurio stands out as a landmark social novel documenting nearly four decades of political, economic, and cultural transformation in tribal society.

3. Strong Socio-Historical Orientation: Kokborok novels are deeply rooted in the socio-historical realities of the Tiprasa people. Issues such as the transition from monarchy to democracy, displacement due to development projects, land alienation, migration, class formation, and political movements recur consistently across novels, reflecting lived experiences rather than abstract imagination.

4. Influence of Education and Political Consciousness: The rise of public education movements like the Jono Shiksha Samiti and the spread of nationalist and leftist ideologies significantly influenced Kokborok novelists. Many novels function as literary documents of awakening political consciousness, social reform, and resistance to exploitation.

5. Preservation of Indigenous Identity and Culture: A major finding is that Kokborok novels serve as a powerful medium for preserving indigenous identity, customs, beliefs, and traditional practices. Themes such as jhum cultivation, village life, festivals, oral traditions, and nature-human relationships are recurrent and central to the narrative structure.

6. Evolution of Themes and Narrative Style: Over time, Kokborok novels have shown thematic expansion—from folklore-based and historical narratives to contemporary issues such as displacement, modernization, cultural conflict, gender concerns, and identity politics. Narrative techniques have also evolved, moving from linear storytelling to more complex, realistic, and symbolic forms.

7. Contribution of Later Novelists: Writers like Shyamalal Debbarma, Nanda Kumar Debbarma, Kunju Bihari Debbarma, Sefali Debbarma, Atul Debbarma, and others enriched the genre by introducing diverse perspectives, aesthetic sensibilities, and subject matter. Their works demonstrate that Kokborok novel writing is no longer confined to pioneering efforts but has become a sustained literary practice.

8. Growth Despite Linguistic and Institutional Challenges: Despite challenges such as script controversy, limited readership, inadequate publishing infrastructure, and marginalization within mainstream Indian literature, Kokborok novels have steadily increased in number and quality, especially after the 1990s.

9. Contemporary Expansion and Future Potential: The publication of numerous novels between 2020 and 2024 indicates a vibrant contemporary phase. This suggests strong future prospects for Kokborok novel writing, particularly if supported by translation initiatives, digital platforms, and wider literary engagement.

CONCLUSION

The history of Kokborok novels—though relatively recent—represents a dynamic journey from oral tradition to written literature. Beginning with Hachuk Khurio in 1987, Kokborok fiction has grown into a vibrant body of work that plays a vital cultural, linguistic, and artistic role among the Tripuri people. Supported by literary organizations and ongoing debates around script and identity, Kokborok novels continue to evolve as a key expression of indigenous literary heritage.

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