Kokborok Literature from Tripura

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Voices from Below

By

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FOREWORD

The virtual presence of a "national ethnos" as the very basis of the construction of modern nation states, except in rare cases of historical circumstances, raises questions about the distinct character of the diverse communities of North-East India. There is indeed a feeling of what Appadurai calls "species of uncertainty" or "suspect body," which the state itself tries to dismember from the national ethnos because of cultural styles and political inclinations. This, with the rapid circulation of high intensity nationalism through the media (including social media), causes widespread anxiety among members of numerically small communities that do not fit into the scheme of high intensity nationalism that majoritarian democracies have produced. This phenomenon has been aggravated more when political organisations take advantage of such social uncertainty to strengthen their power. The turn of the twenty-first century saw two diabolically contesting narratives: one, which smaller communities assert, at times violently, claiming their independent political space by reiterating their historical and cultural uniqueness; and, two, which communities that claim to be the national ethnos assert, also at times violently, demanding rapid nationalisation/mainstreaming of the former. The latter is frequently backed by the establishment under majoritarian democracies like India; as such, it is advanced by the state itself utilising its ideological apparatuses. In turn, communities that Appadurai described as a "small number" see the state as an evil institution that dismembers them from its national ethnos. This contest is aggravated by the pace at which globalisation is affecting the local.

Frequently seen as a hotbed of insurgency, North-East India is today becoming a political and cultural space crisscrossed by various interests in the wake of globalisation. One distinct characteristic of its political life is the way it has been seen as an object of fear by the Indian state. This in turn makes the region an example of the Freudian uncanny—a case, condition, or character that once was familiar and homely, which has been

repressed for a long time and reappears as an embodiment of fear as it does not fit into the present order of things (Freud 2003, 152). This way of seeing the north-east automatically introduces the importance of the historical reading of the case of many small communities of the region who are experiencing the anxiety of social uncertainty (Appadurai) driven by globalisation. Less known and important to the then white colonisers, this region today has become an important geographical location in the post-independence period because of its proximity to the less developed East Asian nations that India is eyeing as a colossal market for her growing economy. The state activities guided by this economic interest bring fear to the locality that is manifested in the form of demand for ST (scheduled tribe) status, implementation of the Bengal Eastern frontier regulations, vigilantism on local borders, etc.—all to aggressively defend their indigenous rights. While the clash is between the global and the local in many places around the world, here in this region it is between the state and its people because the state frequently represents global interests against the interests of the local community.

Phanjoubam argues that most conflicts are embedded in their geographies. As such, the conflict situation in the north-east also carries a geographical factor. He hints at Arunachal Pradesh, from which most of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra originate, a location that has huge potential for hydroelectric power. This brings in China, setting its eye in Arunachal Pradesh looking for an outlet in the Bay of Bengal (Phanjoubam 2016, 3). The region's geography, apart from its history, is in his opinion an inevitable platform for the conflict theatre in the region. This geographical factor also alludes to the "endless" violence in the region frequently linked to neighbouring countries providing a safe haven for insurgents. However, magnifying the geographical factor at the cost of the historical and political uniqueness of the region's diverse peoples will be extremely anachronistic. As stated earlier, the pace of globalisation and the majoritarian democracy that India practices discount the voices of numerically small communities in the hunt for a "uniform nationalism." This results in suppressing the voices, or sidelining the voices, of such people. This, after a long time, returns to haunt in the age of globalisation when identity awareness is mobilised for political purposes in electoral politics in democracy.

The idea of North-East India is however developed largely because of its geographical location. A twenty-two-kilometre stretch between Bhutan and Bangladesh known as the Chicken's Neck connects it with the rest of the country. The rest is a 5,182 km international boundary that is geographically unique. This uniqueness is again aggravated by the large population of East Asian people and their culture, which are markedly different from that of the Aryans and Dravidians that form the major foundation of India's cultural identity. In fact, this is the general understanding of India's north-east from the perspective of an average Indian. But one central issue that most people are not aware of is the various histories the innumerable number of communities in the region carry. Apart from the cultural differences, these histories are frequently used by the communities in question to claim political and territorial space causing many headaches for the Indian state over many years. Of late, there has been a significant paradigm shift in the political dynamics of the region with emergence of what can be called the "other within the other." The long political contest between the Indian state, on one hand, and certain sections of the people of the north-east, on the other, sometimes with large-scale violence, is now seen as a contest between the smaller communities in the region in which the Indian state is playing the role of an interlocutor. Those contesting the Indian state in the past have now identified their other in the region itself and this newfound "other" now occupies the space earlier occupied by the Indian state. A good case of this is the longstanding Naga insurgency. With the insurgents coming to so-called peace talks in the 1990s, violent encounters between the insurgents and their counterparts in the Indian state have mellowed significantly, while the tension between the Nagas and other communities has since been aggravated over territorial claims for the formation of a greater Naga state called Nagalim. The case is the same with several other insurgent groups who are now under the roof of peace talks. This dramatic change in political dynamics in the region has relieved the Indian state of its heavy task of militarily countering the armed groups, though the military presence in the region is still very dense. While the role of the state in the creation of the other within the other cannot be easily ruled out, the uneasy peace that we see today may also succumb to the pressures of overambitious players of peace.

Literary narratives, especially oral ones, carry voices of people that cannot be placed in the official narratives for various reasons. While Manipuri literature, Assamese literature, and Bengali literature have a long tradition of their own, tribal communities in the region lack this tradition and ultimately a literary mapping of such tribes begins with their folk literature. The rich folk traditions of the tribal communities in the north-east serve as one of the most important sources of their historical beginnings, as written records of their precolonial life are sparse and long neglected by historians whose pan-India outlooks frequently find it difficult to give space to the numerically small communities of the region in their macro national history. This historical void can now only be filled by the rich oral traditions. In fact the reason for the late arrival of the written literature of the Boroks of Tripura is attributed to the Tripuri King's fascination with the Bengali language. The *Rajmala*, the historical account of the royal family of Tripura, was written first in the Tripuri language/Kokborok and later written in Bengali. The earlier *Rajmala* written in Kokborok is now unavailable. Noted Kokborok writer Chandrakanta Murasingh's (2011) angst on the issue is registered in the essay "Her People and Her Past":

> Since the near-naked hill people of the princely state, who practiced jumming (shifting cultivation), and the poor subjects of the state spoke in Kokborok language, the Maharajas of the state, sitting on the octangular throne held up by [a] lion, felt ashamed of speaking in the same language. (Murasingh 178)

This deepens the sense of an other within an other that the king and the people are set apart, othering each other. However, the king who carried the ideology of that historical moment had at his disposal all the authority vested on him by that ideology. This naturally places the *Rajmala* within the ambit of an exclusivist narrative that has largely ignored the common people. Today because of its exclusivist nature, it does not carry the respect of the people at large as an authentic text. In her introduction to a collection of essays and poetry from North-East Tilotama, Misra (2011) writes of a "cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with the 'other' cultures" (xiii). This "other" is partly a creation of the domestic political hand while also including those that have stealthily crept into the

domestic political and cultural space from different political and cultural milieus in different historical periods. The Bengali Brahmin authors of the *Rajmala* with royal patronage identify the kings of Tripura as the descendants of Druhyu, son of Yayati. The Brahman authors also give a Kshatriya lineage for the royal family. While the text is seen as the oldest available text on the history of the Borok people in Tripura, it is also seen as an instrument of erasure: a means used by the Brahmins to distort the history of the Boroks by inventing a concocted lineage of the Borok kings. This is also seen in Manipur during the early eighteenth century when the then King Pamheiba patronised the Bengali Brahmins who later invented the similar lineage linking the kings of Manipur to Arjuna, a character in the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*.

Such narratives provide the godly qualities of the kings and they immediately patronised the authors. Thus the ideological space of that historical moment was largely occupied by such narratives. Postcolonial awakening and Western education in the late twentieth century brought a strong wave of scepticism toward these narratives putting a question mark on the identity of the Boroks. Thus, literary writing in Kokborok in the twenty-first century is largely characterised by the writers' awareness of this issue of identity.

> The present-day [kokborok] writers in all the branches suffer from the acute awareness of the reality around. In this respect, they are "brethren of the quill." Except language, they speak almost in the same manner, on the same matter. (Chaudhuri 2005, 19)

This awareness of "the reality around" them is linked to what happened in the past and therefore there is a pastness in the present works of these authors. Today, academic works on Kokborok literature have started to appear, which is a positive development. These need to be encouraged and tapped to fill the void in the socio-cultural life of the Boroks of Tripura.

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PREFACE

The literature that sprang from the state of Tripura has some unique characteristics. In this small state, a variety of languages have developed; of those, the Bengali, Manipuri and Kokborok literatures "have been continuing with age-old literary traditions; but till recently, the three literary streams had not mingled together" (Chaudhuri 2005, 18). A large number of writers in Tripura are bilinguals or multi-linguals; the past few decades have witnessed the emergence of numerous translation works in this region. The Kokborok literature, in written form, however, is comparatively new and organised writings in Kokborok are believed to date from around 1945. Nevertheless, what is deficient in the written literature is compensated for by their rich oral tradition (Chaudhuri 2005, 19). Their folktales and folksongs contain a vivid depiction of the past lives and lived experiences of the Borok people.

This book endeavours to scrutinise the selective folkloric accounts of the Borok community in Tripura, alongside the poetical compositions of contemporary Kokborok poets, namely, Shefali Debbarma, Shyamlal Debbarma, Sudhanya Tripura, Chandrakanta Murasingh, Bijoy Debbarma, and Nandakumar Debbarma, and short-story writers, namely, Debabrata Deb, Bimal Singha, and Haripada Debbarma. Through this investigation, the study strives to illuminate the ethos and identity of the Borok people. The contemporary Kokborok literary texts, as epitomised by the aforementioned works, proffer insights into the socio-cultural experiences of the community that are not always aligned with the pastoral and contented existence of their antecedents. Nevertheless, the Borok people's profound affection for their territory and culture remains an abiding tradition. Consequently, this book endeavours to scrutinise the impediments besetting the Borok community vis-à-vis their oral and literary expressions, which may be construed as their "little narratives" that emanate from the subaltern position, and articulate their tales, predominantly ignored and marginalised. These "little narratives," as they

are denominated, provide a counter-narrative to the dominant discourses that tend to essentialise and marginalise Borok identity, culture, and history. Through this critical inquiry, this study aspires to present a nuanced and intricate comprehension of the Borok community, as well as a profound appreciation of the interstices and complexities of language, culture, and identity in this unique domain.

In the context of Tripura, a state in India, the Borok people, a minority in their own homeland, have been subject to a series of tumultuous events, including the continual influx of refugees and the gradual erosion of their cultural traditions. Against this backdrop, a cohort of emerging writers, wielding their native tongue, Kokborok, have sought to capture the contemporary landscape and express their unique perspectives, anchored in their cultural values and experiences. Through their works, the writers delve into the deep-seated struggles of their community, amidst a landscape rife with socio-economic and political unrest, marked by violence enacted by militant groups and government counter-insurgency operations. Their oeuvre is characterised by a dominant motif of rootedness and an ever-present awareness of the cultural erosion engendered by exposure to other cultures, which spurs their attempts to reclaim their cultural heritage and identity, often via reference to their mythological and folkloric legacies. The selected folktales, folksongs, short stories, and poems under scrutiny in this study constitute a repository of the lived experiences and life of the region's populace, which may be regarded as their little narratives emerging from below and telling their tales, hitherto marginalised and largely unheard. In so doing, the Borok writers seek to salvage and rekindle their rich oral culture, which reflects the economic and social lives of their people, and to restore their voice to its rightful place at the centre of the cultural dialogue.

Postmodernists today pay great importance to the little narratives that appear in the form of poetry, fiction, folktales, folksongs, and so on. Jean-François Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, by provoking scepticism about universalising theories that he terms "grand narratives" and other source of authoritarianism, argues against the possibility of justifying the narratives that bring together disciplines and social practices, such as science and culture: "the narratives we tell to justify a single set of laws and stakes are inherently

unjust" (qtd. in Williams 2002, 211). Lyotard also argues that little narratives have become an appropriate way to explain and define social problems, social transformation, and histories of the people. As such, the selection of creative writing is taken as a counter-narrative or "little narratives" (a term coined by Lyotard) in this study. Creative writing, such as the pieces selected in this study, often portray the ethos, sentiments, and ethnicity of certain tribes that is often absent in non-creative writings, in this case the Borok tribe, which is otherwise referred to as rootedness. In line with this, Homi K. Bhabha asserts that the study of world literature should focus on the historical traumas experienced by people, and the unspoken and unrepresented pasts that continue to haunt the present: "a focus on . . . the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical past" (1994, 12).

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CHAPTER 1

TRIPURA: THE LAND OF THE BOROKS

The north-eastern Indian state of Tripura, bordered by Bangladesh to the north, south, and west, and Assam and Mizoram to the east, is home to a population of 3,671,032 people, comprising 1,871,867 males and 1,799,165 females, as per the 2011 census of India. The population density stands at 350 people per square kilometre, with a 14.7 per cent decadal growth rate. Notably, 87.75 per cent of the population is literate, with male and female literacy rates at 92.18 and 83.15 per cent, respectively. Accounting for a mere 0.3 per cent of the country's population, Tripura is demographically heterogeneous, with the Bengalis forming the ethno-linguistic majority, while thirty two per cent of the population identifies as belonging to the scheduled tribes, a category enshrined in India's constitution. The nineteen scheduled tribes in Tripura, including Tripuris, Jamatias, Mizos, Reangs, Noatias, Halams, Kukis, Uchois, Chaimals, Garos, Mogs, Bhutias, Chakmas, Khasias, Bhils, Lepchas, Mundas, Santals, and Orangs, each possess distinctive cultural traits and practices, such as music, handicrafts, rituals, and artefacts, reflective of their unique identities. While Rahman (2006) posits that the Bengalis and the Tripuris, Jamatias, Mizos, Kukis, Halams, Noatias, Reangs, Chakmas, and Mogs respectively represent the Indo-Aryan and Indo-Mongoloid races (23), it is crucial to recognise that such classifications do not fully capture the complexity and diversity of the sociocultural landscape of Tripura.

The territorial expanse of Tripura is positioned between the longitudinal coordinates of 22°56' to 24°32' north and latitudinal coordinates of 91°10' to 92°22' east, spanning over an area of 10,491 sq. km. with a length of 183.5 km and a width of 112.7 km. It is subdivided into eight districts. The state exhibits a sub-tropical climate with warm and

humid conditions, with an average highest temperature of 34 degrees Celsius and an average lowest temperature of 15 degrees Celsius. Notably, the Gomati, Howrah, Manu, Burima, Longai, Muhuri, Dhalai, Khowai, Juri, and Feni are some of the vital rivers coursing through its terrain. Among these, the Gomati river acquires a pre-eminent status, regarded with the highest sanctity in the regional imagination (Rahman 2006, 20).

The present terrain of the state of Tripura, according to the astute observations of Dikshit and Dikshit (2014), has encountered topographical vicissitudes since the 1980s, involving the discernible divergence between the forest areas designated as such by the state administration and the actual woods (215). As per the Forest Survey of India's 2003 data, the registered forest expanse in the state stands at approximately 60.01 per cent, equivalent to 6,293 square kilometres, whereas the factual foliage cover is conceivably closer to 77.18 per cent, or 8,093 square kilometres. The abundant forest cover in North-East India, as a whole, is attributable to the significant precipitation during the north-eastern monsoon and the landform, replete with flanking hills and mountains, as per Dikshit and Dikshit (2014, 215–16). The topography of the region has been perennially alluring to explorers, embellished by the verdant forest, traversed by six major hill ranges, numerous streams and rivers, and diverse flora and fauna.

Tripura, one among the eleven states with a specialised status in the Indian Union, is distinguished by five salient characteristics: economic and social disadvantage, adjacency to another country, hilly and challenging terrain, financially nonviable status, and low population density compounded by a substantial tribal populace (Bhattacharjee, "What it Means," n.d.). The indigenous inhabitants of this region, known as the Tripuris in geographic parlance and the Boroks or Twipras from a racial perspective, comprise a Kokborok-speaking community of eight principal tribes: Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Murasing, Koloi, Rupini, and Uchoi (Hoque 2015, 1). This community, with its common language of Kokborok, is commonly referred to as the Boroks, a name that is suggestive of the ethnic group's vital identity as the "human beings of language" (2015, 1). The Kokborok tongue belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family's Bodo-Garo group. With a populace of approximately 1.5 million, the Boroks are primarily

concentrated in the state of Tripura, the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, and other regions of North-East India, Myanmar, and Nepal (2015, 1).

For centuries, the region now known as modern-day Tripura was under the sway of the Tripura dynasty, which functioned as an autonomous princely state during the colonial period under the aegis of the British Empire. During this period, the region was referred to as Hill Tippera, while the area directly administered by British India was designated as Tippera District (present-day Comilla District). The independent Tripura Kingdom (or Hill Tippera) acceded to the newly independent India on 15 October 1949. Following the integration of Tripura into the Indian Union, a welter of tensions and sporadic violence ensued in the state, stemming primarily from ethnic animosity between the indigenous Borok tribe and the migrant Bengali population.

The boundaries of the kingdom of Tripura were mutable, with the ancient kingdom stretching from the Sunderbans in the west to Burma in the east, and northwards to Kamrup, a kingdom in Assam, at various times during its existence (Hunter 1909, 118). Although the commencement of the kingdom remains undocumented, the *Rajmala*, also known as the "Garland of Kings" or "Chronicles of Tripura," provides a detailed account of 179 kings from antiquity to Krishna Kishore Manikya (1830–50), rendering it the oldest recorded history of ancient Tripura (Sandys 2008, 8). Written in verse form in Bengali, the *Rajmala* was compiled in sequence by the Brahmin officials of Rajah Dharma Manikya, the 102nd Rajah, during the fifteenth century AD, though its content was reportedly gathered from earlier, disparate sources (Sandys 2008, 8). The *Rajmala* portrays the Tripura rulers as "Kshatriyas," with their lineage traced back to Druhyu, the son of Yayati of the Lunar Race. Furthermore, it describes the forebears of the Borok people as being devoted followers of the Hindu god Siva, who is the god of destruction. However, this portrayal is subject to scholarly debate and interest, with some questioning the book's authenticity and others lamenting its lack of focus on the everyday lives of commoners (Reang 2008, v). Nonetheless, the *Rajmala* remains a crucial source for scholars of Tripura, and has spawned numerous works on the history of the region.

As per the *Rajmala*, the ancient kingdom of Tripura was located in Kirat, a realm that was ruled by Druhyu of the Lunar or Indo-Scythian lineage. Druhyu, the brother of Puru, was exiled by his father Yayati (Yajati) from Pratishthanpur in the eastern territories. Druhyu then erected a city in the Tribeg locality. According to N. C. Nath (2013), who translated the original Bengali verses, the kingdom of Tripura derived its name from the son of Daitya (a descendant of Druhyu), Tripur (Tripura):

> King Daitya, a descendant of Druhyu, was living in the Kirata city for many thousand years as if he was immortal years. After long years a son was born to him. The king named his son Tripura, because he was born in the Trivega [also called Tribeg] country. (14)

According to the *Rajmala,* Tripur was not a religious man and never practised any rituals; as a result he became very cruel:

> He did not study the Vedas, *Agamas* and *Puranas*. He had no education at all. He did not receive any initiation (*diksu*) from a preceptor (guru). He did not care to know anything about God or guru. Neither did he learn any good conduct. He had the nature and behavior of a *Kirata*. He never kept good company with good men. (Nath 2013, 14)

Tripur eventually became a tyrant and oppressed the worshippers of Shiva. With the intervention of Lord Shiva, Trilochandra was born to Tripur's widow and was destined to become a great ruler and adherent of the worship of the fourteen gods, the Sun, Moon, Himalaya, Kamdeva, Fire, Ganges, Water, Prabha, Ganesha, Kartika, Brahma, Sarasvati, Siva, and Vishnu. From Trilochandra's reign, the Chaturdas Devata became the family deities of the royal family of Tripura, and their worship continues at Old Agartala, the former capital of Tripura (Reang 2008, vi). This is how the *Rajmala* recounts the history of the royal family of Tripura and their association with the Hindu faith. Trilochandra, after marrying the daughter of the Hedamba king, went on to conquer various lands and even met Yudhistir of the *Mahabharata*. His twelve sons are known as the twelve Tripura families. One of Trilochandra's sons, Daksina, later ascended the throne after his father's death. In the fourteenth century, the seventy-fourth king of Tripura, Jajarpha, invaded Rangamati (renamed

Udaipur after Udai Manikya), which was located on the banks of the river Gomati in South Tripura.

After the king of Rangamati was defeated, Rangamati was made the capital of Tripura. In the book we also see that Ratnafah, the witty king and son of Khyasangfah, the ninety-eighth king of Tripura, with the aid of Muslim troops had conquered the Gaur Kingdom; shortly after, he obtained four thousand troops and the title of "Manikya," which the kings of Tripura have retained ever since. Apart from this, the book contains a large number of cantos about the life, affairs, and rule of different Tripura Rajas. The *Rajmala*, an important chronicle of the Tripura royal family, offers extensive details on the lives and affairs of the rulers and their engagements with foreign territories. The document also highlights the critical role played by Hinduism in the development of Tripura's cultural identity. Nevertheless, certain scholars, like James Long (2008), have expressed concern regarding the validity of the book as a complete history of ancient Tripura. For instance, Long notes the absence of Buddhism in the book, despite its former prominence in Bengal: "[though Bhuddism] was at one period the predominant religion on Bengal and extended its sway from the Indian Ocean to the frontiers of China" (31).

This, however, may be because the chronicles were composed by the Hindu Brahmans patronised by the Tripura rulers, "who may have adopted in them their usual policy of taking little notice of their religious opponents, passing over their history in contemptuous silence" (Long 2008, 31). Furthermore, while the *Rajmala* provides a wealth of information on the royal family's history, it remains conspicuously silent on the experiences of the common Borok people. In fact, not a single page of the chronicle focuses on the ancient history of rural Borok life, raising questions about the validity and scope of the *Rajmala* as a comprehensive historical account. Thus, a more nuanced understanding of the Borok people's history and experiences requires an analysis of their oral traditions, including their folktales, songs, and other forms of creative expression. It is through these cultural artefacts that one can gain insight into the psyche and cultural ethos of the Borok people, and their contribution to the development of Tripura's diverse and vibrant society. Ultimately, a holistic approach to the study of Tripura's history must take

into account the perspectives and contributions of all its diverse cultural communities.

E. F. Sandys (2008), in *History of Tripura*, has delineated the history of the region into three distinct epochs, namely, the Hindu Period, which encompasses the chronicles recorded in the *Rajmala*, the Mohamadan Period, and the English Period. The Mohamadan Period, which spanned from the thirteenth century onwards, was marked by a series of Muslim invasions that befell the Tripura Kingdom. These invasions had a profound impact on the social and cultural milieu of the region:

> The state was first overrun by the Muhammadans under Tughril in 1279, and was again invaded by Ilyas Shah in the middle of the fourteenth century and by Nawab Fateh Jang in 1620. The plains portion . . . was not, however, annexed by the Mughal Empire until 1733. (Hunter 1909, 118)

It is noteworthy that despite the Muslim invasions that persisted since the thirteenth century, the mountainous terrain remained beyond the ambit of the invaders' rule. As a result, the unique culture and traditional lifestyle of the autochthonous population remained unaffected and persevered in the rural locales. The Tripura Kingdom was never assessed to revenue and was never included in the Muslim administration's purview. However, it is essential to note that the Mughals exerted significant influence over the appointment of the Tripuri kings, as documented in historical accounts (Hunter 1909, 118).

The history of the Tripura Kingdom, with its constant warfare and conflict with neighbouring states, bears testament to the interplay of various cultures and beliefs. During the early fifteenth century, under the patronage of successive Tripura kings, thousands of Bengali Hindu families were settled in the kingdom. This era witnessed a flourishing of Bengali literature in Tripura, accompanied by the spread of Hindu Brahmin settlements, temple building, and the adoption of Vaishnavism. These cultural exchanges between the Bengali and Tripuri communities resulted in a synthesis of "indigenous animism and the ritualism of Bengali Hindus" that endures to this day (Debbarma 2006, 29).

The colonial period in Tripura witnessed the establishment of the state as a princely entity, with the Tripura monarchy holding an estate in British India, namely Tiperra District or Chakla Roshnabad (currently Comilla

District in Bangladesh). The imposition of revenue collection on the Tripura plains by the East India Company precipitated a popular uprising among the indigenous tribes. As the eighteenth century wore on, the Tripura King's holdings suffered a steady diminution in tandem with escalating British tax demands. The intrusion of the British criminal and civil procedure code, with its inherent cultural incompatibility, contributed to the overarching sense of cultural dislocation and disorientation experienced by the indigenous populace (Choudary 1995, 26).

The penultimate phase of the nineteenth century marked the enactment of the Tenancy Act in 1885–86, whereby the British sought to attract cultivation and bolster revenue by granting tenancy rights to their Bengali subjects at a remarkably low cost. In furtherance of this objective, an additional thirty thousand hectares of plain land were settled, thereby exacerbating the pre-existing pressure on land. The king's liberal donation of land to high caste Brahmins, Muslims, and government officials further exacerbated the problem. The banning of *jhum* (shifting cultivation) in forest areas in 1887 and the subsequent Jhoomia Rehabilitation Scheme of 1889 attracted more non-tribals than tribals, taking more land away from the latter. These measures, modelled on the British system, served to significantly compound the tribals' land scarcity crisis by the end of the nineteenth century.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a renewed agitation triggered by the massive influx of non-tribals into Tripura, which was encouraged by the settlement policy of the king. This heavy influx of migrants exacerbated the ethnic conflict in the state, leading to the proliferation of a growing number of ethno-centric tribal parties, with the "Gana Muktiparishad," a left-wing tribal party, at the forefront. The government's failure to restore the alienated tribal lands created a sense of mistrust and betrayal among the indigenous community, prompting the emergence of pro-tribal parties such as the "Tripura Upajati Juba Samity" (TUJS) in 1967, and the "Tripura National Volunteer (TNV)" and numerous other insurgent groups. These developments culminated in the 1980s communal riots between the indigenous tribes and the Bengalis.

It is reasonable to presume that the current cyclical ethnic violence in Tripura is both inevitable and intractable, inasmuch as the ethnic minority

remains excluded from a sense of equity in the economic, psychological, social, and political sphere by the majority group.

Emerging in the late twentieth century, the Borok people's cultural expressions, in the form of contemporary Kokborok poems and short stories, exhibit a complex tapestry of their social, economic, political, and cultural existence. These artistic endeavours manifest the enduring verities of daily life and the imaginative creativity of the people, while simultaneously providing a fascinating vantage point into Borok belief systems and socio-political life, and the profound bonds they share with their land and natural surroundings. However, these works also bear witness to the profound impact of the Tripura insurgency on the quotidian lives of the people. The Kokborok narratives, both old and new, offer a profound insight into the social, economic, and spiritual life of the Borok people. In the tradition of other North-East Indian writers such as Robin S. Ngangom (Manipur), Janice Pariat (Meghalaya), Malsawmi Jacob (Mizoram), Kynpham S. Nongkynrih (Meghalaya), Temsula Ao (Nagaland) and others, Borok writers explore themes of insurgency, ethnic violence, identity, nationhood, corruption, memory, regional ecology, and the simple everyday life of the common people. These works are a testament to the resilience and vitality of Borok culture in the face of the challenges posed by modernity, conflict, and cultural change.

Through an exploration of selected Kokborok folktales, as well as the poetic works of contemporary Borok writers such as Shefali Debbarma, Shyamlal Debbarma, Sudhanya Tripura, Chandrakanta Murasingh, Bijoy Debbarma, and Nandakumar Debbarma, as well as the short stories of Debabrata Deb, Bimal Singha, and Haripada Debbarma, the present study seeks to delve into the intricate ways in which these literary works strive to represent the identity and culture of the Borok people. Drawing upon their lived experiences, these works reveal a freshness and self-assuredness that roots them firmly in their cultural heritage. Through creative reimaginings of their myths and folktales, these writers attempt to reclaim their past, challenging stereotypes imposed upon them by mainstream literature in Tripura. By highlighting certain enduring values that permeate everyday life, they seek to reclaim their identity and counteract the socio-political oppression and suffering experienced by their people.

The examination of folklore as a medium of cultural representation has been astutely highlighted by Alan Dundes, illuminating how it functions as a looking glass into the collective identity and experience of a given society. This renders folklore an authentic means of self-expression that allows for a comprehensive representation of the people and their culture. Dundes (2007) writes:

> For folklore is autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people's own description of themselves. This is in contrast to other descriptions of that people, descriptions made by social workers, sociologists, political scientists or anthropologists. It may be that there is distortion in a people's self image as it is expressed in that people's songs, proverbs, and the like, but one must admit that there is often as much, if not more, distortion in the supposedly objective descriptions made by professional social scientists who in fact see the culture under study through the culturally relative and culturally determined categories of their own culture. Moreover, even the distortion in a people's self image can tell the trained observer something about that people's values. (55)

The tales, dances, and songs of the Borok people represent a narrative form of their oral heritage and folk culture, mostly centred on rural people and their customs, rituals, and beliefs. The *jhum* (their shifting cultivation) serves as a vital cultural backdrop for the majority of their stories, and their everyday life activities, such as love, merry-making, sadness, death, and marriage, are all woven into their tales. Kokborok folklore, therefore, becomes a vital signifier of their cultural ethos, serving as a counter-narrative that stands in opposition to the dominant metanarrative imposed by the book the *Rajmala*, which excludes the lived experiences and histories of the common Borok people. The folklore emerges as a mode of resistance that allows the Borok people to contest their marginalisation and reclaim their cultural heritage in a manner that disrupts the dominant discourse of power.

The present investigation highlights a significant fact that, historically, the kings of Tripura have relied on the general populace solely for revenue collection, leaving them to fend for themselves. This has resulted in the emergence of two literary traditions in Tripura. One is characterised by the accounts of the illustrious kings of the prehistoric "lunar dynasty"

presented in the *Rajmala*. The other, developed in isolation in the Boroks' folk language, has remained predominantly oral. The early Kokborok oral literature further blossomed into stories, songs, and proverbs that genuinely depict the people's daily experiences, socio-economic life, and their sufferings and plight, which are treated as the little narratives for this study. Their folksongs and folktales narrate the arrival of a new season, the festive seasons, their rituals and practices, and present in their own simple way the origin of certain natural phenomena and the abstract concept of good and evil.

The emergence of contemporary Kokborok poems and short stories in the late twentieth century marks a pivotal moment in the cultural production of the Borok people. Through these works, Borok writers offer a vivid and realistic portrayal of the social, economic, political, and cultural life of their community. The theme of rootedness to the land figures prominently in these poems, reflecting the deep attachment of the Borok people to their hills, rivers, and surrounding landscape. Through the celebration of their attachment to the land, the poets attempt to locate the Borok people's identity in their physical environment. In his expressive and romantic Kokborok lyric "A House by the Riverside," Nandakumar Debbarma subtly contrasts the transience of human life with the perennial flow of the river, suggesting that the collective experiences and sufferings of the Borok people across time can serve as a new marker of identity for future generations. By drawing on the metaphorical power of rivers like the Hwangho, Mekong, and Gomatee, Debbarma creates a powerful sense of connection between the land and the Borok people. His poems are infused with a deep love and respect for the natural world, reflecting his intimate relationship with the hills and rivers that form the backdrop of his life and art.

Sudhanya Tripura, a luminary of poetry, unearths the life and experiences of the marginalised people, predominantly the jhumias, in his literary oeuvre. His poems like "Woo-Wang," an exquisite piece of writing, evoke a vivid picture of the *jhum* field and the stilt-house, resonating with the organic harmony of the rural community. In "Mad Pipers," Tripura (2009) masterfully portrays the quotidian existence of a mad piper, who, while playing his flute, tends to his fishing net on the riverbank (300) amidst the breathtaking backdrop of nature. Furthermore, "Displaced Heart" is a

poignant depiction of the arduous life of the rural folk, their trials and tribulations, and their everyday struggles.

The emergence of Kokborok literature from Tripura must be emancipated from the narrow confines of insurgency, trauma, and ethnic conflicts. The contemporary Kokborok poetry, with its emphasis on nature and land, dismantles these stereotypes and also shapes their myths and folktales. The interwoven relationship between land and identity generates a sense of solidarity and purpose that is deeply rooted in the psyche of the Borok people. The conventional understanding of land as a static entity fails to capture its dynamic and hybrid spatiality. Postmodern thinkers like Henri Lefebvre and Edward W. Soja have critically reimagined space as a fluid, mobile, and multifaceted entity. Lefebvre's work *The Production of Space* (1991) postulates that space is not just a physical realm but also encompasses subjective and objective dimensions that are perceived and experienced through our senses (1991, 12). It generates knowledge, discourses, and experiences, thereby producing and enacting various cultural assumptions. The indigenous people's poems and creative writings prominently feature land and nature, reflecting their profound connection with their surroundings and the ways in which these elements shape their existence. Such creative expressions celebrate the Borok people's cultural heritage and affirm their identity in the face of marginalisation and cultural erasure.

The contemporary Borok poets, cognisant of the perilous implications of misrepresentation, vigilantly guard their ethnic identity against the forces of dominant discourse and the socioeconomic factors that have contributed to their marginalisation and affliction. Shefali Debbarma's "Lamination" is an expression of sorrowful lamentation, bemoaning the persistence of stereotypes associated with the Borok identity perpetuated by the Scheduled Tribe card. In this poem, Debbarma employs images of *risa* and *pachhra*, traditional Borok garments, to contrast with the laminated identity card imposed by the government. This juxtaposition of Borok cultural symbols and the laminated identity card reflects the perspectives of two different discourses on culture. The *risa* and *pachhra* embody the cultural and traditional values of the Boroks, while the government paper represents the dominant discourse or the immutable identity that has been thrust upon them by the state authorities. When these

objects are placed together within the *khuturuk* after a century, the worn-out shreds of *risa* and *pachhra* starkly contrast with the intact laminated S.T. card, emphasising the vulnerable nature of cultural identity in the absence of appreciation and use by the dominant culture, which only understands the official representations framed and laminated. This highlights the precariousness of cultural identity and underscores the urgent need to resist the dominant discourse that seeks to marginalise and erode indigenous cultures.

The manifold expressions of the intimate relationship between man and nature, so compellingly enunciated through both Kokborok folksongs and contemporary Borok poetry, reveal an evocative continuity of the Borok people's imaginative and intellectual bond with their land. While the former gleans inspiration from the fecundity and vitality of life and nature, the latter is discerningly focused on the current social and political milieu, where the Borok people seek to underscore the fluidity and mobility of their relationship with their land. In the works of Chandrakanta Murasingh, we witness a powerful attempt to reclaim Borok identity through the emancipatory potential of poetry, as he emphasises the rich cultural heritage and depicts the distinctive Tripura landscape and natural surroundings. The resilient and hybrid spatiality that this imaginative and intellectual bond embodies constitutes a steadfast resistance to the stultifying and reductive representations imposed by the dominant discourse. The Borok people's profound and unyielding attachment to their land and nature, as poignantly reflected in contemporary poetry, manifests as a counter-narrative that vociferously disrupts the pernicious mainstream discourse, which relentlessly seeks to marginalise and obliterate the identity of indigenous cultures. Through their indefatigable and resolute commitment to their imaginative and intellectual bond with their land, the Borok people not only celebrate their culture and traditions but also boldly and unreservedly resist the persistent attempts at their cultural effacement by the dominant discourse.

The paucity of contemporary Kokborok fiction in translation belies their potential as a valuable sample to gauge the contemporary socio-political milieu of the Boroks. The fourth chapter, entitled "Contextualising Little Narratives of the Boroks," highlights carefully selected contemporary stories that serve as a discerning reflection of the