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Kokborok and language politics in Tripura

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Abstract

Under the surface of peaceful coexistence of the tribals and non-tribals in Tripura there exist resentment and conflict. Often the battle is sought to be fought out in the name of linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences suppressing the real issues. Demographic, economic, and educational imbalances are some of them. They erupt through passionate resurgence of ethno-linguistic identity by the tribals. The chaos is clandestinely orchestrated and utilized by the invisible stakeholders from both the sides to mobilize the mass for power. Election politics conceals their nefarious agenda. This article exposes some of these unseen forces showing that language-politics is actually the sophisticated guise for marginalization and exploitation of the populace by the vested group. The tug-of-war is therefore independent of any ethnic division; it is between the exploiters and exploited across the board. Ethno-nationalism is just a deceiving device for continuation of mass exploitation and deprivation. Raising atavistic slogans for restoring the lost supremacy of the tribals by ignoring the ground reality of *today* cannot ensure peace and harmony between the tribals and non-tribals staying together for centuries despite occasional jerks. Knowledge is the saviour.

Keywords: Kokborok, language politics, ethno-nationalism, Manikya dynasty, migration, outsiders

1. Introduction

The Boroks, predominantly speaking Kokborok live largely in Tripuraⁱ (India), in addition to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh) and Myanmar. They belong to Bodo-Garo group of Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan family. Nineⁱⁱ major communities constitute the Boroks viz. Debbarma, Tripura, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Murasing, Kolo, Rupini and Uchoi. The population of Tripura is 3673917 with Scheduled Tribes contributing 1,166,813 (30.95%) and the Bengalis 66% (approx.). Manipuris and others form the rest. Kokborok is spoken by 25.88% of the indigenous people (qua 2011 census). Apparently, the small state offers a peaceful life for its inhabitants.

However, under the serene surface of peaceful coexistence of multilingual and multicultural populace of Tripura there exists a vibrant flow of conflict and resentment. Though the battle is sought to be fought out in the name of language, the deep-rooted issues are multifarious. Demographic imbalance, economic lop-sidedness, academic and educational backwardness allegedly coterminous with the divide between tribal and non-tribals are some of them. These off and on express themselves in terms of passionate resurgence of ethnic identity especially among the minority i.e. the tribal community. Urge for preservation and promotion of indigenous language(s), culture and identity is often fore-grounded and highlighted by the invisible stakeholders to mobilize the ignorant and innocent common mass under their folds. Politics of election at various levels conceals the nefarious agenda of the vested groups. In the rest of this article, some of these unseen forces will get exposed, by implication though, by showing that language-politics is actually the sophisticated guise for marginalization and exploitation of 'the have-nots' by 'the haves', of the 'others' by the 'centre'. And the tug-of-war is therefore as much intra-community as inter-community contrary to its popular (*mis*)interpretation to the converse. Ethno-nationalism is just a deceiving device for continuation of mass exploitation and deprivation.

2. Ethnic divide in Tripura

In Tripura there exists an ethno-linguistic line of division between the Boroks and the Bengali. The former are a demographic minority compared to the latter: the ratio stands at 30.95% vs. 66%. Once upon a time, the indigenous tribes or Boroks were in majority.

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But the Bengali population outnumbered them following large-scale immigration by them into Tripura both before and after the independence of India. Understandably, today there prevails a hegemonic hierarchy in the relation between the tribes and the Bengalis. Time and again, this gets expressed in resentment and hatred leading to extremism resorted to by the youths of the minority communities especially since the 1980s.

2.1 Tripura as a Tribal state

There exists a strong undercurrent in favour of considering Tripura as a tribal state. Let us now consider the major issues behind such a trend.

2.1.1 Geography

Geographically, Tripura was a much larger kingdom than what it is today and its indigenous inhabitants were the majority in number. But the picture is much changed today due to multiple historical and political factors. Let us have a flash back view of the trajectory of the transformation. As Dutta (1984:1) states

“[a] tiny mass, a slender strip of earth ...in the south-west extremity of Assam, flanked by Mizoram on the east and bounded on three sides by the Bangladesh territory, the present State of Tripura has been carved out of the princely State of Tippera, minus *Chakla Roshnabad*, once forming an indivisible appanage of the State in contiguous British districts. ...Before independence the native State of Tripura was known as *Parbatya Tripura* (Hill Tippera) in the British political parlance while adjoining plains district in East Bengal had carried the name of Tippera.”

2.1.2 Demography

Thus, now shrunk in physical size, “Tripura was a tribal princely state for more than 1300 years before its accession to the union of India in October 1949. The state remained almost ‘independent’ in spite of its inclusion into the British Indian territory since the late 18th century.” Ghosh (2003:226). He also adds that in the Pre-independence Hill Tipperah the tribal population was dominant: 19 major groups (communities) with remarkable cultural similarity. The picture remains largely similar even today. More than 85 percent of the Tripura tribes speak Kokborok and nearly 85 percent of them are still Hindu.

2.1.3 Kokborok Script and Language

Although the Boroks do not have any extant piece of ancient literature written in Kokborok, there is evidence that Kokborok once existed as a language with a script called *Koloma*; the script is now lost. In this regard, Wikipedia writes under ‘Kokborok literature’

“A significant hint for the antiquity of the Kokborok language can be found in the lines in the *Rajmala*, the chronicle written now in Bengali of the Kings of Tripura, which mentions that “*Rajmala*” was first written in Kokborok:

*Purbe Rajmala chilo Tripur bhashate,
Payar Gathilo sob sokole bujhite,
Su-bhashate Dharmaraje Rajmala Koilo,
Rajmala boliya lockete hoilo.”*

- *Rajmala* - 2nd part, Dharma Manikya Chapter, page 6.

‘Earlier the *Rajmala* had been in Tripur language. To help people understand it, the *Rajmala* was recast into poetic form in Bengali under instruction from King Dharma Manikyo. This recast version in Bengali came to be known among people as the *Rajmala*.’

Again, the Chronicle of the Borok kings called the *Rajratnakar* was originally written in Kokborok using the *Koloma* script by Durlobendra Chontai.

Since late 19th century efforts are on to revive Kokborok in written form, not in *Koloma* script however. Radhamohan Thakur’s *Kok-Borokma* (the grammar of Kokborok) (1900), and *Traipur Kothamala* (Kokborok-Bengali-English translation book) (1906) started the process. Daulot Ahmed’s *Kokbokma* (grammar of Kokborok) (1897) got wide acclaim. Many books appeared in 20th century such as *Koktang Kului* (Bangshi Thakur 1948), *Surungma Yakhili* (Sudhir Krishna Debbarma 1962), *Kokrobam* (a dictionary of Kokborok) (Ajit Debbarma 1967), *Tripura Kokborok Bhashar Likhito Rupe Uttaran* (a discourse on the evolution of orthography of Kokborok) (Tripura Kokborok Unnayan Parishad 1972), *Anglo-Kokborok-Bengali Dictionary* (a trilingual dictionary) (Binoy Debbarma 1996), *Kak Kuthumma* (a descriptive grammar of Kokborok) (P. C. Dhar 1987) etc.

2.1.4 Kokborok Literature

From the mid-20th century there has been a vigorous activity for creating literature in Kokborok. The maiden literary composition in Kokborok was the compilation of thirty-three spiritual songs in book form titled *Tripura Kha-Khachangma Khumber Boi* (1942) by Khushikrishna Debbarma. The first Kokborok magazine *Kwatal Kothoma* was published in 1954 with Sudhanya Debbarmaⁱⁱⁱ as the editor. This magazine regularly published folk songs, folk tales, and articles. Some such renowned writings include *Chethuang*, a novel by Sudhanya Debbarma, and *Phunukmung*, a collection of riddles in Kokborok, and *Gandhiji Koklam* (a talk on Mahatma Gandhi) by Dasarath Debbarma.

Publication of Kokborok literature has been continuing since then. Here are some prominent ones. Mahendra Debbarma *Cherai Surungma* (textbook for children) (1958), Ajit Bandhu Debbarma *Kok-Surungma* (1963), Alindralal Tripura *Lamani Homchang* (a play) (1972), Bible Society of India *Smai Kwtal* (The New Testament of the Bible in Kokborok) (1976), Shyamlal Debbarma *Dundurkma* (compilation of 12 short stories) (1984), Sudhanya Debbarma *Hachuk Khurio* (first modern Kokborok novel) (1987), Chandra Kanta Murasing *Haping Garingo Chibuksa Ringo* (collection of poems) (1986), *Kolomtwi Kishi Mwkhang* (1986), *Bolong Kwkhurang* (1987), Nanda Kumar Debbarma *Kok-Borok Geeta* (translation) (1988), Prabhash Chandra Dhar *Kokborok Ramayana* (translation) (1999), Chandra Bala Debbarma *Dr. B. R. Ambedkor* (2001), R. K. Debbarma *Twiprani Laihuma* (the *Rajmala*) (2002), Laxmidhan Murasing *Gura* (*Gora* of Rabindranath Tagore) (2007), Sefali Debbarma *Hatal Khamchuru Bahai* (2014), Santosh Debbarma *Boltayerni Kandid* (*Candide* of Voltaire in Kokborok) (2014), Suprava Debbarma, *Somerseset Momni Kothomarok* (2014) etc.

2.1.5 Education of the Borok tribes

For taking stock of the status of literacy and education today among the tribals in Tripura a consideration of its history since the days of the monarchy provides a logical and

convenient backdrop. The following excerpt quoted from ‘Tripura’s Tryst with Literacy’ by Chowdhury and Chakraborty (2013) serves the purpose:

“Tripura was a tribal state ruled by monarchy for centuries. Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya was the last king of Tripura during India’s Independence and the state’s merger with India in 1949. During those days, [the] tribals reeled under feudal exploitation and illiteracy. [T]he king and his administration did little for spread of education among the tribals. In this milieu a group of young educated tribals, including Dasarath Deb^{iv}, (who later on became the first tribal chief minister of the state in 1993) formed an organisation for mass education called the Jana Siksha Samiti in 1945. This Samiti within 3 years opened around 450 primary schools across Tripura and declared that its fight is not merely against illiteracy but also against poverty and social injustice.”

Thus, the first mass literacy campaign for the tribes was started by the Jana Shiskya Samiti in 1945. The organization also tried to redress the problems of poverty, shifting cultivation and superstitions amongst the tribals. This struggle for education has been continued by the subsequent governments. The Literacy Assessment Survey (LAS) 2016 of the Govt. of Tripura published in Literacy Statistics 2016, “found the overall literacy rate 97.22% for the population of age 7+ and above years.” The state thus has acquired the first position in literacy rate in the country.

Apropos literacy status amongst the tribal population in Tripura the Census 2011 reveals that 79.05% tribal people in the state are literate as against 56.50% in 2001 Census report. The tribal literacy rate has significantly increased during the period of 2001-2011 qua ‘Tribal People’ www.tripurainfo.com (26-04-2019). Kokborok got the official language status of Tripura in 1979 and is currently fighting for recognition as a National language of India.

In addition to the measures taken by the successive governments after Tripura acceded to the Union of India in 1949, a number of organizations and institutions also contributed to the development of literacy and education amongst the tribals. Some such are: i) Tribal Research and Cultural Institute, ii) Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, iii) Tripura Kokborok Unnayan Parishad, iv) Tripura Kokborok Sahitya Sabha, v) Ramakrishna Mission and Ramakrishna Math, Agartala, vi) Kokborok tei Hukumu Mission, vii) Smile Foundation, viii) Jana Unnayan Samiti Tripura, ix) Twipra Students Federation, x) Tripura Baptist Literature Society etc.

In view of the above facts and discussion a strong case in favour of describing Tripura as a ‘tribal state’ emerges. However, a closer inspection of the empirical facts of the other side of the story merits consideration.

2.1.2 Tripura as a Bengali state

Despite the historical facts and their implications, there is no gainsaying the fact that Tripura today is predominantly a Bengali state. The demographic relation between the Bengalis and the tribals stand at 66%: 30.95%. The following facts further substantiate this contention.

- a) Bengali is the first and foremost official state language in Tripura (despite Kokborok and English). It is the lingua franca of divergent Bengali communities and the Manipuris. More crucially, tribals too use it to communicate with the Bengalis, and with people speaking other tribal dialects and subdialects because of the latter’s mutual unintelligibility. These include the Moghs, Garos, Mundas, Chakmas and Oriyas.
- b) Bengali is most widely used in official communiqués.
- c) Kokborok is used largely as a spoken language; literature publication in Kokborok was till recently non-existing. Hence it was, and still is, convenient to have Bengali as the medium of instruction in schools and prescribe study materials in Bengali.
- d) Kokborok Teachers (KBT) are appointed for teaching courses in Kokborok in schools. But the learners hail from diverse first language backgrounds, and the teacher fails to impart the lessons to them all. Again, parents too do not see any promising prospect for their wards in studying (in) Kokborok.
- e) According to Economic Review of Tripura 2010–11, Tripura has a total of 4,455 schools: 2298 Primary/Junior Basic schools; 1274 Middle/Senior Basic schools; 533 High Schools; and 350 Higher Secondary (+2) schools. Medium of instruction in them is predominantly Bengali, followed by English in a limited number of English medium schools. Hindi medium schools are few. Nowhere Kokborok is the means of academic exercise including the text books and other study materials.
- f) The media in the state -- both print and electronic -- use Bengali widely.
- g) As per the official website of the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Government of Tripura, of the 61 newspapers in Tripura majority are published in Bengali (Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of print media in Tripura

Serial No.	Type	Bengali	English	Kokborok	Manipuri	Bilingual: Bengali-Kokborok	Bilingual: Bengali-Bishnupriya
1.	Daily	16	3	1			
2.	Weekly	35	1		1	2	1
3.	Fortnightly	1					

3. The Debate

Table 2 below presents a bird’s eye view of the ongoing debate over to whom belongs the state of Tripura: the tribals

or the Bengalis.

Table 2: Tripura is a tribal state and Tripura is a Bengali state

	Tripura is a tribal state	Tripura is a Bengali state
1.	Indigenous ethnic communities constitute a sizable quantum of population in Tripura: 30.95%	Bengalis approximately constitute 66% of the population of Tripura. Remaining 3% belong to the others.
2.	Kokborok is the leading language of the tribes of the state and is an official language.	Bengali got the recognition as an official language of Tripura much before Kokborok. Almost the entire population of the state can understand and

		communicate in Bengali.
3.	Kokborok was the official language of the princely state of Tripura till 19 th century.	However, from early 20 th century onwards Bengali enjoyed the status of <i>Rajbhasha</i> in Tripura. It was patronized and promoted by the royal family. Bengali, in its refined form, was made the language of administration. A number of Dewans or prime ministers of the Tripuri kings were Bengalis. Important bureaucrats, court poets, agricultural experts, peasants and businessmen were Bengalis. This historic transformation cannot be ignored.
4.	Indigenous tribes were in majority in the princely state. Bengalis were <i>outsiders</i> and they outnumbered the tribals because of successive immigrations.	Bengalis started to migrate from Bengal since 15 th century <i>under the connivance and patronage of local Tripuri kings</i> . The migration continued slowly afterwards as farmers and intellectuals from East Bengal shifted to the princely state of Tripura. Bengali settlers came initially as <i>welcome</i> migrants under the Manikya kings. In 1949 Tripura acceded to the Union of India and, as per the provision of the Independence of India, Bengalis from East Pakistan were free to migrate into India (now containing Tripura) and settle there as citizens. Hence, Bengali settlers are not <i>outsiders</i> any more: they are very much Indians.
5.	The migration continued even long after the Independence and Partition of undivided India.	This is because of the recurrent political unrests and riots between the Hindus and Muslims in East Pakistan (erstwhile East Bengal) now Bangladesh. For instance: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) From 1947 onwards many Bengali Hindus from Comilla, Noakhali, Sylhet, Kishoreganj, Chittagong etc. migrated and settled in Tripura because of political and ethno-religious violence they witnessed in and around the time of the Noakhali Riot in 1946; the migrants discovered social, cultural and linguistic similarity on this side of the border. Some settlers were Muslims too. They have been living here without any resistance till 1980 – the year of first ever ethnic violence in Tripura on the issue of the outsiders vs. the natives. 2) Tripura joined the Union of India in 1949. Prior to that there were huge riots in East Pakistan before and after India's Independence. This compelled many, especially Hindus, to migrate to India i.e. Tripura, Assam and West Bengal. This migration process continued thereafter, intermittently though. 3) In and around 1971 on account of Bangladesh Liberation War another round of political and civil unrest and riots took place in East Pakistan forcing many from the latter (now Bangladesh) to migrate and settle in Tripura, beside other parts of India. 4) A sense of political and social insecurity is latently present among the Hindus in particular in Bangladesh even now. It breaks out off and on, as reported in media. This traumatized psyche results in secret migration into Indian territories around Bangladesh.
6.	It is not wise to call Tripura a Bengali state because the second large in population in the state are the indigenous people. 184 Tripuri kings successively ruled these indigenous tribes for 1300 years until it joined the Union of India in 1949. These monarchs were also the founders of Tripura.	<i>Once upon a time</i> the region called Tripura included the Plains regions on the west and north (called Chakla Roshnabad, now parts of Bangladesh) and the hilly interior on the east and south. The former was called Tipperah and the hilly interior called <i>Parbatya</i> Tripura. The large territory got reduced in course of time as the Plains region went under the virtual control of, first the Mughals and then the British. The Bengalis from these plain lands shifted to the eastern part i.e. <i>Parbatya</i> Tripura as <i>internal migrants, not as outsiders</i> . There was no resistance from the local inhabitants either. Subsequently, the Tripuri kings entertained this migration even after the plains regions got separated because Tripura needed experienced peasants to teach the indigenous hill tribes the art of settled cultivation as against shifting cultivation in hilly terrains. Subsequently a series of events led to large scale as well as intermittent or clandestine migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh into Tripura. These are: (a) the religion based social unrest and civil riots between the Hindus and Muslims before and after the Independence of India in 1947; (b) Tripura's accession to the Union of India in 1949; (c) the provision for migration for anybody from Pakistan to India (and vice versa) as one of the conditions for Independence of India; and (d) Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 resulting in large scale political and civil disturbance adversely affecting the Hindu-Muslim relation. On account of these historical factors the Bengali settlers in Tripura outnumbered the local tribes. One must not overlook these facts of the recent history in trying to <i>passionately</i> highlight the ancestry of long rule of 184 successive Borok kings over Tripura. One must remember that problems born off today's reality cannot be sorted out by yesterday's facts.
7.	Majority of indigenous people do not know Bengali: they face difficulties in dealing with this language used as an official language in Tripura.	Kokborok script <i>Koloma</i> is long lost. Instead Bengali language and script got the patronage of the kings of Tripura since 1900. They got it 'refined' by scholars from Bengal in order to introduce it as the language of administration. The practice has continued to be followed long afterwards till date. Hence it is natural that the tribal populace of Tripura, like any non-native learners, have to

		learn Bengali as a second language and get used to use it as the latter is employed as an official language of Tripura.
8.	With the spread of Christianity, <i>majority</i> of indigenous students and people are more comfortable in writing/communicating in English rather than in Bengali.	<p>Spread of Christianity specifically affected the youths who went to Shillong, Guwahati, Aizol etc. for higher studies in the 1980s: they mostly converted to Christianity. (Ghosh, 2003) But back home the majority of the tribal population – about 85% -- are still Hindus^v and their form of worship is <i>animistic</i> – ‘a belief in the existence of God in all elements’. Hence, to claim that the majority of the indigenous students feel more comfortable in using English than Bengali due to the impact of Christianity is an oversimplification, if not a travesty of facts.</p> <p>Again, English and Bengali are both Second Languages (L2) for the Borok people. They should not face any serious trouble in learning either of them. The presence vs. absence of the required facilities for learning either of them plays a crucial role in this regard.</p> <p>In Tripura the medium of instruction is predominantly Bengali. The tribal children get ample scope to learn and practice Bengali both within the classroom as well as the larger society outside. By contrast, they get extremely limited exposure to English and it is not surprising that on an average the tribal learners’ (just as non-tribal ones’ too) knowledge of English is far from satisfactory. Hence, it is empirically as well as scientifically unjust to claim that the tribal students in Tripura find it more comfortable to learn and use English particularly because of the impact of Christianity! Equally untenable is the claim that the tribal students find it difficult to learn and interact in Bengali. Language learning is skill^{vi} learning; a religion may be motivating factor for it, but not the ultimate determinant of it.</p>
9.	All the Bengalis are outsiders.	<p>The entire Bengali population in Tripura are not outsiders. For instance, North Tripura is an ancestral Bengali homeland; it has Bengali inhabitants since long. As per the Paschimbagh copper plate inscription kept in the Kolkata museum, Bengalis were settled in North Tripura by the Bengali Buddhist king Sri Chandra of the Harikela Kingdom in 10th century. Later Bengalis were also settled in this area by the Tripuri Manikya Dynasty since 15th century.</p> <p>Most of the Bengalis living in Tripura today are new settlers having shifted/migrated subsequently, however.</p>

This debate on who are the bona fide citizens of Tripura *today* – the indigenous tribes or the Bengalis -- is bound to go on incessantly unless and until one takes an impartial stand on the issues at stake and offers a judicious verdict aimed at restoring the erstwhile peace and harmonious coexistence between the two.

If the tribals place a strong claim on the ownership of the state by virtue of the long reign of the Tripuri / Tipra / Twipra dynasty, the Bengalis throw down the gauntlet with a stronger claim emboldened by their *current* demographic majority, academic and intellectual superiority, and financial strength.

Some tribal leaders – political and otherwise -- have been trying to revive the *lost tribal* supremacy of the Dynasty days by raking up the issue of ethno-nationalism since 1980s. This is an easy bait to mobilize the tribal mass under their fold by projecting the dream of a revived *tribal land* (initially envisioned as a separate independent country carved out of India, and later toned down to a state within the Indian Union) called Twipra Land. This ‘secessionist’ attitude led to recurrent ethno-political violence in the last four decades which saw its climax in June 1980 itself: thousands of Bengalis were butchered, countless houses and villages of were torched throughout the state; thousands became homeless; their economy and source of earning was lost. Understandably retaliation ensued leading to murder of many ordinary members of the tribal communities accompanied by arsenal, loot, land grabbing, and mass dislocation from the home stead – whether ancestral or newly constructed in areas with mixed population of tribals and Bengalis.

The then ruling Left Front government, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), noticed the conspiracy

allegedly of the invisible Rightists: to divide the people of Tripura along the ethnicity and identity (read citizenship) issues, to grab the tribal vote bank to acquire political power, to weaken and destroy the tribal-Bengali unity (the mainstay of the communists’ class based politics) by injecting the gall of mutual distrust and hatred! The leading role in this campaign of politics of division was taken *allegedly* by the educated tribal youths having undergone education in English medium institutes in the North East of India under the aegis of the Church and Christianity. These Rightists among the tribals were working hands in glove with the anti-left sections among the Bengalis within Tripura and their mentors outside. Social unrest continued along with hit-and-run terrorist activities and kidnapping of Bengalis by the tribal youths belonging to the underground extremist organizations like Tripura National Volunteers^{vii} (TNV), National Liberation Front of Tripura^{viii} (NLFT), All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF)^{ix} and many other minor ones. Political parties like Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS) came up as the over ground mentors or mouthpiece of these prohibited terrorist organizations. The Bengali counterpart was *feebly* noticed in the emergence of the United Bengali Liberation Front (UBLF)^x and a small political party called Amara Bangali.

In 1988 Left Front was ousted by the Coalition government of Indian National Congress (I) and TUJS and the coalition ruled for 5 years under two chief ministers. The Bengali hegemony continued; tribals did not get much of what was promised to them before the assembly election 1988; only vested groups on either side of the coalition usurped official benefits. In the next assembly election, the coalition government failed to win and retain power.

The new communist government *again* under the Left Front succeeded to curb terrorism gradually to a large extent. More importantly, they succeeded with sincere political and welfare intention to restore the *endangered* harmonious relationship between the tribals and the Bengalis. Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTADC) came into being specially to look into the overall development issues of the tribal people. Plenty of development projects within the rural areas, large scale rubber plantations, creation of employment opportunities etc. paved the way for restoration of simple living with peace in both the communities. With 97.22% of literacy Tripura in 2016 stood first in the country.

After successive rules for 25 years in 2018 assembly elections Left Front lost to the Bharatiya Janata Party and Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (N.C. Debarma fraction) alliance. The defeat is primarily attributed to the former's inability to provide employment to nearly eight lac youths just as they could not offer any hope for employment in near future. The picture of unemployment is still daunting. Two successive governments led by BJP since 2018 have come up with plenty of opportunities for the unemployed youths. In addition to filling up the long standing vacant posts, they offer various schemes for self-employment and entrepreneurship. Things have started taking a positive turn, though there is a long path ahead.

The issue of survival in an extremely competitive world is very crucial and pertinent to each and every body concerned despite their varied ethnic identities -- Bengali or Tribal: future of both is under threat.

So, the bottom line goes like this: change in the helm of power does not ensure solution to the plethora of problems the entire state is suffering from. Areas like health, mass education, communication, employment, public distribution system, and above all economy – need immediate attention. The situation aggravates further if citizenship and permanent domicile along with ethnic identity of the people occupy the centre stage of discourse, as is happening now-a-days. Leaving aside the other problems for the time being, the people of Tripura need do the soul searching among themselves instead of looking for extraneous help and seeking to find a solution to the *burning* issue of 'national' identity of the people of Tripura as is currently playing out under the guise of language dispute between Bengali and Kokborok.

To that end let us take a *critical* stock of the demographic picture of the state with an eye on its historical perspective. Repetition of some issues needs not be distractive.

4. Beyond Controversy

4.1 Account of Bengalis migrating, becoming majority and prominent in Tripura

Before 1947, present Bangladesh was a part of the undivided Indian Bengal, called East Bengal. Partition of India in 1947 was due to religious difference. On the western front, half of the Punjab went to Pakistan. On the east, more than half of Bengal went to Pakistan on account of having Muslim majority. East Bengal came to be known as East Pakistan and the present Pakistan as West Pakistan. Subsequently, due to geographical distance and isolation between the two parts of Pakistan, their linguistic and cultural differences resulted in the formation of a new country called Bangladesh in 1971 in the wake of Bangladesh Liberation War. During both the 1947 and 1971

partitions majority of Hindu Bengalis from East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh migrated to Tripura, Assam and West Bengal of India as these three states were adjacent to their homeland. Hindu Bengalis from East Pakistan also got refuge in the National Capital Area of Delhi in what is now known as CR Park.

The question however remains as to whether the Bengalis en masse are immigrants to Tripura as is popularly proclaimed? Or is it a sheer misleading construct by some vested groups say, the enthusiasts of ethno-nationalism?

Accounting for the presence and the majority status of the Bengalis in Tripura at present from a historical perspective <https://www.quora.com/How-did-Bengalis-come-into-Tripura-states-under-the-heading-Bengali-migrated-to-Tripura-in-4-phases-.....>:

“Phase 1: Bengalis were already residing in Tripura since many centuries, as not the whole Tripura as per today's map was under Manikya dynasty [;] Bengalis were residing in the part occupied by Bengal and present part of Tripura.

Phase 2: Many [B]engali sculpture experts were brought from [B]engal by Tripuri king[s] to Tripura and were given land, work and citizenship of Tripura by royal family. Also, the Hindu rulers of Tripura's Manikya dynasty had always encouraged the immigration of and settlement of non-tribals, especially Bengalis to Tripura. *Rajmala* (italics by me) authenticates the fact that Ratna Manikya (1464-1468) was the first to 'settle 4000 Bengalis in four places' in Tripura.

Phase 3: During Noakhali riots in 1946 many Bengali Hindu survivors referred to as East Bengali Refugees were sheltered in temporary relief camps in Comilla, Chandpur, Agartala the present capital of Tripura and other places.

Phase 4: A large migration of Bengali Hindus and Muslims took place in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and other places during Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.”

In other words, Bengalis started to migrate from Bengal since 15th century under the direct or indirect patronage of the kings of Tripura and by mid-1940s they outnumbered the indigenous tribals. Before 1947 itself a sizable number of Bengalis came over to Tripura from East Bengal as government employees, businessmen, skilled labourers (including agricultural experts), sculptors, artists, academics and intellectuals and they got settled here.

The first Bengali bureaucrat to come over to Tripura in the Raj period and occupy a post of eminence was Nilmani Das. Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya (1862-1896) paid a special attention to the overall improvement of Tripura. “The pace of improvement was quickened with the appointment of Nilmani Das, seeded British-bred officer, to the post of Dewan in 1873.” (Dutta, 1984:28). Dewan was the designation for the post of Prime Minister. This was followed by the appointment of Umakanta Das as the Prime Minister of the Kingdom. The Agartala H E School founded by Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya in 1890 and developed by Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya, was renamed as Umakanta Academy in 1904. Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, assuming himself the charge of the State in 1927, appointed Rai J.C. Sen Bahadur as one of his ministers in the Mantri Parishad (Executive Council). As Dutta (1984:38) also notes “Twelve years later [i.e. 1939] a Cabinet of Ministers was formed with J.C. Sen as the Prime Minister of the State.” Thus, it is historically evidenced that the Tripura kings used to invite the Bengalis^{xi} and appoint them in various important official and administrative posts.

Besides, the king of Tripura Bir Chandra Manikya had high regards for Rabindranath Tagore, the famous and Nobel laureate Bengali poet and intellectual. He often sought Tagore's advice while dealing with governance issues. His son and successors continued the tradition leading to heavy Bengali influence on Tripura's culture. This cultural similarity led to migration of a large number of people from erstwhile undivided Bengal to Tripura. Subsequently, partition of Bengal also witnessed a large-scale migration of Bengali Hindus from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to Tripura. As a result, at present, Bengali speaking people constitute the ethno-linguistic majority in the state.

This influx of the Bengalis also got a special incentive as Tripura kings were great fans of Bengali art and literature. As Binoy Debbarma *et al.* (2018:34) note: King Bir Chandra Manikya declared Bengali as Rajbhasha of the Tipra royal court during his period 1862-1896. The royal family encouraged Bengali language, practiced and promoted its learning. They invited Rabindranath Tagore to Tripura and in consequence he visited Tripura seven times. The royal family produced Bengali poets like Princess Ananga Mohini Devi the eldest daughter of Bir Chandra Manikya. Many kings from Dhonno Manikya to Bir Bikram Manikya practiced and patronized art, literature and music. They assigned Bengalis the intellectual, academic and creative works such as writing the royal chronicles like *Sri Rajmala* (Kailash Chandra Sinha 1896) and *Rajmala* (Kali Prasanna Sen 1926-31).

Under the royal patronage literary works got composed in Bengali e.g. *Rajmala*, *Gazimala*, *Champakbijoy*, *Krishnamala* all ancient bio-historic compositions. The royal family members including some kings also contributed to Bengali literature. For instance, Bir Chandra Manikya was a poet, lyricist and musician and he wrote in Bengali. He took the successful initiative to refine and enhance Bengali as a language of administrative communication. He was the first to confer official recognition to Rabindra Nath Tagore, the author of *Bhagno Hridoy*. Madan Mohan Mitra, a Bengali, was the court poet during the reign of Bir Chandra Manikya. Inspired by the king his daughter Princess Ananga Mohini Devi (1868-1918) started writing poetry and songs in Bengali. She was extremely gifted and promising. The court poet was in charge of her learning and creative writing. In addition, her elder brother Radha Kishore Manikya, a friend of Tagore, was a major source of inspiration for the budding poetess. The blessing of Tagore was a special gift for Ananga Mohini. Tagore was overwhelmed to note that Bengali was the *Rajbhasha*, the state language of Tripura. He wrote:

“*Tripurar raj poribare bohukaal theke bangla bhashar shomman chole aashche. bostuto, shokol desher itihashhe shabhabik obosthay desher bhasha kebol matribhasha noy, taa rajbhasha. desher rajar jemon kortobbo projapalon kora, temni bhashakeo rokha kora.*”

‘In the royal family of Tripura, Bengali language has been getting respect since long. Indeed, in the history of all countries, during normal times the language of the state is not only the mother-tongue, but the state language [*rajbhasha*]. Just as it is the duty of the king to take care of

the subjects, it is also his responsibility to protect [and preserve the] language.’

Ananga Mohini's first poetic composition is *Konika* consisting of twelve Bengali poems. The collection is dedicated to her departed father King Bir Chandra Manikya. Love and nature are the central themes of these poems. Her next poetic collection *Shokagatha* contains of a series of laments written on the imminent death of her beloved husband. Another famous collection of lyrics by the poet is *Preeti*.

In addition, Radha Mohan Thakur, a member of the royal family, was a prominent intellectual and scholar well versed in Bengali. He wrote the grammar of Kokborok *Kok-Brokma* (1900). His *Traipur Kothamala* (1906) is a Kokborok-Bengali-English translation book. *Traipur Bhasabidhan* (1907) is his third prominent book written in Bengali.

During the reign of King Dhormo Manikya (1431-1462) *Sri Rajratnakaram* was composed in Sanskrit by the two priests and court-poets Shukreshwar Chakraborty and Baneshwar Charkraborty in 1458. Both the poets were Bengali.

4.2 Proof of peaceful coexistence of the tribals and non-tribals during the Raj

As Ghosh (2003) notes the princely state of Tripura was ruled by the tribal kings for 1300 years before its accession to the union of India in October 1949. Here tribals were dominant and in majority. However, due to regular influx^{xiii} of Bengalis the latter outnumbered the tribals inside Hill *Tipperah*.

- In consequence of their prolonged co-existence, the tribes came in close contact with Bengalis even during the rule of the Rajas and gradually adopted Bengali culture, religion, life style etc. (Bhadra 1996:167): ‘The process of assimilation has also affected their food habits, dress patterns and marital relations’ as Ghosh (*ibid*) observes.
- Most importantly, the Tirpuri tribes adopted Bengali as their second language. As noted earlier, the Tripuri kings’ love for Bengali language and culture was evident from the beginning of 15th century. They also gave Bengali the status of *Rajbhasha* or official language from the 18th century.
- Nearly 85% of the tribal communities practiced Hinduism, in addition to animism. The ‘Hindu identity of the Tripuris and some other tribes (Jamatia, Noatia) also led them to engage Brahmin priests on certain social occasions and worship Hindu gods and goddesses.’ (Ghosh *ibid*.)
- ‘Maharajas of Tripura, who were Tripuris, attempted to sanskritise a section of the tribes by according them the status of *Tripur Kshatriya*, an upper caste of the Hindu society.’.....‘The process of sanskritisation of the tribes and their subsequent assimilation under the royal patronage helped in developing a tradition of tribe-non-tribe unity in Tripura from the mid-14th century.’ (Ghosh *ibid*.)
- Many administrative and legal structures of colonial Bengal were incorporated in the state from the mid-19th century. The tribal monarchs also looked towards the educated Bengali middle class to run the state administration.
- Tripura rulers’ experience as *Zamindars* of Chakla Roshnabad and some areas of Noakhali and Sylhet

districts of undivided neighbouring Bengal had made them aware of the need for agricultural development (Ganguly 1999:7). The shifting cultivation or *jhum* method practised by the tribes was primitive and less productive. So, the rulers looked forward to the Bengali peasants, mostly Muslims, to introduce settled cultivation and to raise the volume of revenues. Understandably, these peasants settled permanently for the benefit of Tripura.

- g) The peaceful co-existence between the tribals and Bengalis in the reign of the Rajas and thereafter was also because of the activities of the Communists.

“The Communists’ penetration into the tribal dynamics further strengthened this tradition of communal harmony and a kind of nationalism. Not surprisingly, the growth of ‘tribalism’ in Tripura during the 1930s and 1940s did not take a sectarian turn; it instead targeted the politics and actions of the royal administration and feudal lords. The Communist influence also explains the way Tripura tribes have avoided, till recently, any inter-tribal clash or anti-India feelings, which so often characterise tribal movements in the North-East.” (Ghosh 2003)

5. Conclusion with suggestions

Tribals were once majority in Tripura but are not so now. Bengalis were bona fide inhabitants of the large Tripura kingdom living in the plains parts close to water. They were encouraged by the kings to come over to main part of Tripura and help in settled cultivation, art, culture, sculpture, administration etc. Mughals and British occupied plains land and gave these areas as zamindari -- called Chakla Roshnabad -- to the Tripura kings. In consequence, Bengalis shifted to the eastern part of Tripura and settled here. At this phase, these were not treated as instances of migration per se.

Migration to Tripura by Bengalis in true sense started after India’s Independence due to impacts of: i) Noakhali Riot of 1946, ii) partition of Bengal in 1947, and iii) Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Social, linguistic and cultural similarity on both sides of the international border played also an encouraging role behind such migration. Bengali language was in use in the royal family since long – respected, patronized and promoted by the Manikya dynasty. It became the language of administration, communiqués and creative writings by the members of royal family.

There were centuries of peaceful coexistence between the tribals and the Bengalis in Tripura. But this state of harmony came under threat from some vested groups in the name of ethno-nationalism. These self-seeking groups rope(d) in the issue of language to sensationalize the narrative and harvest political gains by mobilizing mass support for catapulting themselves into the helm of power and position. Automatically, as per the blueprint of the invisible evil forces, the issue of identity gets commingled with language and ethnicity. This vicious combine of language-identity-ethnicity perpetrates all-pervasive unrest and distrust between the otherwise peace-loving tribes and their Bengali counterparts.

It should be obvious by now that behind the issue of language (i.e. Kokborok in the present case) with its well-constructed sickening ramifications, is hidden a nefarious politics which can be justifiably termed as Language

Politics. Endangered ethnicity, insecure identity, and threatened existence are all constructs of the vested groups hungry for power and position. If one side of the people of Tripura can be made to fall prey to this traumatized mass psyche the impact of it is bound to infect the other side too. This is a horrifying game of mutual devastation for illusory make beliefs. The people of Tripura are now pitted against this.

All people longing for peace and prosperity need be on their alert. They cannot afford to be carried away by the sensationalised hyperboles of *baseless* issues.

The people of Tripura, therefore, irrespective of their linguistic and ethnic divergences must resist any such pseudo ethno-nationalistic moves under the crazy, atavistic slogan for revival of the lost royal majesty, demographic majority and linguistic supremacy of Kokborok or any other tribal languages for that matter.

All will have to accept the indelible fact of today viz. Bengalis (along with other non-tribal populace of the state) are definitely Indians since Tripura is long incorporated into India; it is no longer an independent princely kingdom of the olden days.

So are the tribal folks: for long they have been living in close proximity with the Bengalis. Both the communities know each other and are used to stand united despite occasional jerks executed by the agents of division and destruction (e.g. the ethnic violence of 1980s and thereafter). They both need to learn that division makers (if not secessionists) are not nationalists or well-wishers of the common mass.

It is true that the Bengalis are demographically majority. But it does not and should not entitle them to exert aggression and coercion on the minority community i.e. the tribals and others. They need to shed off their megalomania and high handedness (if any).

It is their responsibility to assure the tribals that there is no need for fear, apprehension, and mutual distrust. It is the duty of the Bengalis to come forward to preserve, protect and promote Kokborok; and never humiliate, insult, and underestimate it. Bengalis must remember that it is the forefathers of the tribals i.e. their generous kings who gave shelter to the Bengalis, patronized, promoted and respected their language (Bengali) and culture. It is time to repay the loan, to cultivate mutual respect, love and caring. Only this can ensure peace and happiness in the mixed community life -- the reality of Tripura.

Conversely, tribals should also reciprocate similarly; they need to abstain from using ‘pejorative’ terms of address and references like ‘wansa’ for the Bengali people. They have to respect Bengali culture, religion, language, rituals, and freely socialize with them. This only can assure peace and harmony in Tripura. When the storm is over, we all realize the extent of its devastation!

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ⁱ The administration of the territory was taken over by the Indian Government in 1949, when with the signing of the Agreement of Merger by the Maharani (Queen), Tripura merged with the Indian Union. On January 21, 1972 Tripura attained full statehood with a legislature of sixty members and a Council of Ministers.

ⁱⁱ Alternatively, Chattopadhyay (1972), Choudhury (2007) and Acharyya (2007) etc. enumerate eight sub-tribes of the Boroks. I follow Binoy Debbarma (2009) to include the Debbarma in the group.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sudhanya Debbarma was one of the founders of the Tripura Janasiksha Samiti.

^{iv} Dasarath Debbarma is popularly known as Dasarath Deb.

^v Halams and Noatias follow the Sakti cult while Kalais and Rupinis follow Vaishnavism.

^{vi} Learning a language requires acquiring the four skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW).

^{vii} Tripura National Volunteers, a Tripuri nationalist militant group, led by Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl launched an armed struggle in the early 1980s to separate Tripura from India. TNV surrendered in 1988 and in 2000 merged into the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tripura_National_Volunteers

^{viii} National Liberation Front of Tripura is a Tripuri nationalist organisation in Tripura, leading armed rebellion since 1989 to secede from India and establish an independent Tripuri state. It is accused of forcefully converting people to Christianity. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Liberation_Front_of_Tripura

^{ix} Considered a terrorist organisation by India, All Tripura Tiger Force is a Tripuri nationalist insurgent group founded in 1990, under Ranjit Debbarma and is headquartered in Tarabon (Bangladesh). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Tripura_Tiger_Force

^x United Bengali Liberation Front (UBLF), was born in 1999, with the proclaimed objective of protecting the Bengalis in Tripura from attacks by other terrorist outfits. Its formation, epitomizes the clash of interests between the Tribals and the non-Tribals. https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/tripura/terrorist_outfits/ublf.htm

^{xi} Bengalis are referred to nowadays as 'outsiders' or 'wansa' by the tribal folks in Tripura with a 'pejorative' implication.

^{xii} Bengalis shifted to and settled in Tripura in different historical phases: i) internal shifting from the western plains region of the kingdom (subsequently called Chakla Roshnabad) beside Noakhali and Sylhet currently in Bangladesh; ii) migration from East Bengal under the patronage of the Mankiya kings; iii) migration in consequence of the Noakhali riot in 1946 and the partition of India in 1947; and iv) migration in the aftermath of Bangladesh Liberation War 1971.