

## Linguistic Diversity And Multilingualism in Tripura: A Sociolinguistic Study

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### Abstract:

*Tripura, located in the north-eastern region of India, is home to a rich variety of languages that reflect its cultural and ethnic diversity. This sociolinguistic study explores the linguistic landscape of Tripura, focusing on the multiple languages spoken across different communities, including Bengali, Kokborok, Chakma, Reang, Halam, and several others. The research highlights the harmonious coexistence of these languages and the multilingual practices of the people in daily life.*

*By analyzing existing literature, census data, and general language patterns, this paper presents an overview of how multilingualism functions as a social asset in Tripura. The research also touches upon the importance of language in education and communication, noting the positive role of local languages in strengthening cultural ties. The methodology of the study is qualitative, relying on secondary sources, policy documents, and ethnographic reports to understand patterns of language use and language shift in the state.*

*This study underlines the value of linguistic diversity as an integral part of Tripura's heritage. It also suggests that recognizing and supporting multilingual practices can contribute to educational development and community well-being. The paper concludes by encouraging continued appreciation and use of all languages spoken in the state, ensuring that they remain a vibrant part of Tripura's social fabric.*

**Keywords:** *Living Place, Teaching, Life Skill Education, Secondary School Teachers.*

### Introduction:

Language plays a multifaceted role in society, extending beyond its function as a means of communication to encompass cultural identity, social organization, and historical continuity. In multilingual societies, language acts as a vital link between diverse communities, facilitating the expression of collective heritage and fostering a sense of shared identity. India, renowned for its rich linguistic diversity, boasts a complex sociolinguistic landscape, with Tripura being a notable example. This northeastern state is characterized by a unique blend of Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages, reflecting the intricate ethnic and cultural dynamics at play (De & Bhowmik, 2019).

Despite its small geographical size, Tripura is home to over 19 recognized Scheduled Tribes, each possessing distinct linguistic and cultural practices that contribute to the state's remarkable cultural heritage.

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According to the Census of India (2011), Bengali is the predominant language spoken in the state, serving as the official language. However, the state is also home to several tribal languages, including Kokborok, Chakma, Reang (Bru), Halam, Mog, and Uchai, among others. These languages primarily belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, although some have Indo-Aryan roots (Burling, 2003).

The linguistic diversity of Tripura is not solely a product of demographic factors but is also shaped by historical and socio-political developments. The influx of Bengali-speaking people from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during and after the Partition in 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 had a profound impact on the linguistic composition of the state (Bhattacharya, 2014). Nevertheless, tribal communities have managed to preserve their linguistic identities through oral traditions and cultural practices, underscoring the resilience and adaptability of these communities.

This paper seeks to examine the sociolinguistic realities of Tripura, employing a qualitative approach that draws on secondary sources such as census data, existing literature, policy documents, and ethnographic reports. By adopting a sociolinguistic framework, this study will explore how language reflects and influences ethnicity, education, class, and policy (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). The analysis will also incorporate key concepts such as diglossia, code-switching, and language shift (Fasold, 1984; Gumperz, 1982; Mohanty, 2010), providing a nuanced understanding of the complex linguistic dynamics at play in Tripura.

Through this research, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationships between language, culture, and identity in multilingual societies, highlighting the importance of linguistic diversity and the need for inclusive language policies that promote the preservation and promotion of minority languages.

### **Linguistic Landscape of Tripura**

Tripura's linguistic landscape is characterized by a rich diversity of languages, with Bengali and Kokborok being the officially recognized languages. However, numerous other tribal languages are spoken across the state, reflecting the complex cultural and ethnic dynamics of the region. Bengali dominates the spheres of administration, education, and media, while Kokborok has gained significance due to state recognition and increasing institutional support.

In contrast, other indigenous languages such as Chakma, Reang, Halam, and Mog are primarily used within their respective communities, lacking formal support in education and administration. The linguistic diversity of Tripura is a result of historical migrations and continuous interaction between tribal populations and migrants, which has shaped the state's unique cultural and linguistic identity.

The Chakma language, with its Indo-Aryan roots, is traditionally written in the Ajhā Pāth script, although it is now often represented in Bengali or Roman scripts. The Reang and Halam dialects, belonging to the Kuki-Chin branch of the Tibeto-Burman family, are mostly oral and lack standardized orthographies, which limits their formal usage and makes them vulnerable to decline.

Multilingualism is a widespread phenomenon in Tripura, with individuals often employing different languages in various domains. Native languages are typically used at home, Bengali for official purposes, and English in education. This linguistic fluidity reflects the adaptive practices of the population and highlights the coexistence of multiple linguistic codes.

In urban centers, trilingualism is becoming increasingly common, with English gaining prominence due to globalization and its association with higher education and economic opportunity. Conversely, rural

communities continue to rely on their indigenous languages as essential components of daily life, cultural rituals, and traditional knowledge systems.

The absence of formal support mechanisms, such as teaching aids, literary development, and preservation policies, poses a significant risk to the long-term viability of these languages. Therefore, it is essential to develop and implement policies that promote the preservation and promotion of these languages, ensuring their continued relevance and importance in the lives of their speakers.

### **Domains of Language Use**

The use of language in Tripura is characterized by a high degree of domain specificity, where different languages are employed in distinct contexts. Bengali is the predominant language in official and educational settings, serving as the lingua franca in various spheres such as markets, government offices, and media. This widespread use of Bengali underscores its importance as a unifying language across different communities in Tripura.

In contrast, Kokborok is increasingly being utilized in tribal governance, primary education, and local cultural programming. Despite its growing importance, the implementation of Kokborok in these domains faces challenges, including a shortage of trained teachers and teaching materials. This highlights the need for more robust support systems to ensure the effective integration of Kokborok in these critical areas.

Languages such as Chakma, Halam, and Reang are typically confined to informal settings, including homes, rituals, storytelling, and folk traditions. These languages play a vital role in cultural transmission and preservation, yet they are largely absent from formal institutions. The dominance of Bengali and English in formal domains contributes to a stratified linguistic environment, where tribal languages are often marginalized.

The increasing trend of code-switching, particularly among the youth, reflects the complex linguistic dynamics at play. Digital media and youth communication often involve the combination of English, Bengali, and native words, showcasing the adaptive nature of language use in Tripura. However, despite the opportunities offered by social media for linguistic engagement, minority languages still face reduced visibility, underscoring the need for greater representation and support.

The domains of religion and spirituality also exhibit diverse language use. Pali is frequently employed in Buddhist liturgies among the Chakma community, while Sanskritized Bengali remains prominent in Hindu ceremonies. Kokborok continues to be used in indigenous rituals and oral narratives passed down through generations, highlighting the importance of language in preserving cultural heritage and identity.

Overall, the linguistic landscape of Tripura is characterized by a complex interplay of languages, with each playing a distinct role in different contexts. Understanding and supporting this linguistic diversity is crucial for promoting cultural preservation and social cohesion in the state.

### **Language Attitudes And Identity**

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping identity in Tripura, serving as a crucial marker of cultural heritage and ethnic pride for indigenous communities. For these communities, languages such as Kokborok and Chakma are not merely means of communication but also symbols of their unique cultural identities. However, the increasing dominance of Bengali and the perceived socio-economic benefits of English have significantly influenced language preferences among younger generations. This shift has contributed to a gradual decline in the use of native languages, posing a threat to the rich linguistic diversity of the region.

The debate over scripts, such as the choice between Bengali and Roman scripts for Kokborok, underscores deeper issues related to cultural autonomy and identity assertion. The decision on which script to use is not merely technical but also deeply symbolic, reflecting broader questions about the community's identity and its relationship with the dominant culture. Similarly, the revival of the Chakma script is seen as a way to strengthen ethnic identity and cultural pride among the Chakma people. These debates highlight the complex dynamics between language, identity, and power, and the need for communities to have control over their linguistic and cultural expressions.

In educational settings and community centers, discussions and conflicts about script choice are ongoing, reflecting the complexities of representing the phonology and identity of speakers. While English is often viewed as a language of prestige and global access, and Bengali as a marker of integration and opportunity, tribal languages are frequently perceived as limited in utility. This perception can lead to a lack of support for these languages, further exacerbating their decline.

Despite these challenges, there is a growing recognition among educators, policymakers, and community leaders of the importance of sustaining indigenous languages. Efforts to promote these languages include cultural festivals, language days, and literature competitions in Kokborok and Chakma. These initiatives aim to foster pride among younger speakers and encourage the continued use of these languages. By celebrating linguistic diversity and promoting the use of indigenous languages, Tripura can work towards preserving its rich cultural heritage and ensuring the long-term viability of its languages.

### **Challenges to Linguistic Diversity**

The linguistic diversity of Tripura is facing significant challenges that threaten the long-term viability of its indigenous languages. One of the most pressing issues is language shift, where many tribal youth are increasingly adopting Bengali or English as their primary means of communication in pursuit of social mobility and economic opportunities. This shift has resulted in a weakening of intergenerational transmission of native languages, as younger generations are less likely to learn and use their ancestral languages.

The social perception of tribal languages as less "modern" or economically viable further exacerbates their decline. Many people in Tripura view dominant languages like Bengali and English as more useful for education, employment, and social advancement, leading to a lack of support for tribal languages. This perception is reinforced by the limited presence of tribal languages in formal domains such as education, government, and media.

Another significant challenge is the lack of standardized scripts, pedagogical materials, and trained teachers for tribal languages. This limitation restricts the development of these languages and makes it difficult to promote their use in formal settings. Government efforts to promote multilingual education often fall short due to poor implementation, limited funding, and prioritization of dominant languages. Additionally, there is often a disconnect between policy formulation and ground-level execution, which further hinders the promotion of tribal languages.

The Right to Education Act provides for mother-tongue-based education, but its execution remains limited in tribal areas. Digital and mainstream media also largely ignore minority languages, contributing to their lack of visibility and prestige. The sociolinguistic stigma attached to tribal languages discourages their use, particularly among younger generations who may view them as less valuable or prestigious.

Migration from rural to urban areas has also contributed to the abandonment of native languages, as young people adapt to dominant linguistic norms in search of education and employment. Without substantial and

sustained efforts to promote and support tribal languages, many of Tripura's indigenous languages face the risk of extinction.

Efforts to address these challenges include community-driven initiatives such as the development of Kokborok children's books, preservation of oral folklore, and training of native language teachers. These programs aim to promote the use of tribal languages and foster pride among younger speakers. However, they require consistent support from both governmental and non-governmental institutions to make a measurable impact. By working together, it is possible to promote the linguistic diversity of Tripura and ensure the long-term viability of its indigenous languages.

### **Policy And Educational Interventions**

The Indian Constitution, under Articles 350A and 350B, mandates the provision of education in the mother tongue for children at the primary level. In Tripura, this constitutional provision has been partially implemented through the introduction of Kokborok in primary schools. However, the implementation of this provision for smaller tribal languages like Reang, Mog, or Uchai has been inadequate. These languages often lack sufficient educational materials, and in some cases, such materials are non-existent.

Even when language teaching is provided, it is often limited to symbolic inclusion, with poor integration into the curriculum and minimal instructional time. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to language education in Tripura, one that reflects the linguistic ecology of the region. Multilingual curriculum frameworks that incorporate the diverse languages of the state could help promote linguistic diversity and support the educational needs of tribal students.

Teacher training programs are also crucial in this regard. These programs should be developed with a focus on tribal languages and bilingual pedagogy, enabling teachers to effectively teach students in their mother tongue while also promoting proficiency in dominant languages like Bengali and English.

Furthermore, there is a need for greater investment in linguistic research, documentation, and development of instructional content for tribal languages. Institutions like the Tripura Tribal Research and Cultural Institute can play a pivotal role in coordinating such initiatives. By working together, policymakers, educators, and community leaders can develop effective strategies to promote the use of tribal languages in education and support the linguistic rights of tribal communities.

Ultimately, a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to language education in Tripura can help promote linguistic diversity, support the educational needs of tribal students, and preserve the rich cultural heritage of the state's indigenous communities.

### **Conclusion**

The linguistic diversity of Tripura is a testament to the state's rich cultural heritage and complex social dynamics. While Bengali and English are predominantly used in public and formal settings, the indigenous languages of the region remain essential to the identity and cultural continuity of the local communities. These languages are not just a means of communication but also a vital part of the community's history, traditions, and values.

However, the challenges of language shift, marginalization, and policy neglect pose a significant threat to the preservation of these languages. Many indigenous languages are at risk of disappearing due to the increasing dominance of Bengali and English, and the lack of support and recognition for minority languages.

To address these challenges, it is essential to have coordinated efforts from government agencies, local communities, and academic institutions. This can be achieved through the development of inclusive language policies that recognize and promote the use of indigenous languages in various domains. Educational reform is also crucial, and it should focus on promoting multilingualism and linguistic diversity.

Digital engagement can also play a vital role in promoting the use of indigenous languages and preserving the multilingual legacy of Tripura. By leveraging digital platforms and technologies, it is possible to increase the visibility and accessibility of minority languages, and to provide new opportunities for language learning and cultural expression.

Ultimately, promoting equal status for all languages spoken in the state and fostering pride in linguistic identity can help to preserve the rich cultural heritage of Tripura. By recognizing the value and importance of linguistic diversity, Tripura can serve as a model for sustainable multilingualism in India, and provide a framework for other states to follow.

This approach requires a shift in mindset and a commitment to promoting linguistic diversity and inclusivity. It involves recognizing the importance of indigenous languages and taking steps to support their use and preservation. By working together, government agencies, local communities, and academic institutions can help to promote the multilingual legacy of Tripura and ensure the long-term viability of its indigenous languages.

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