



Kokborok Novels: A Survey From The First Novel ‘Hachuk Khurio’ (1987) To Contemporary Works

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Abstract

Kokborok, the indigenous language of the Borok (Tripuri) people in Tripura, Northeast India, belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family and has evolved from a rich oral tradition. This survey traces the trajectory of Kokborok novels from the pioneering work *Hachuk Khurio* (In the Lap of Hills, 1987) by Sudhanwa Debbarma to contemporary expressions, highlighting their role in preserving cultural identity amid socio-political changes. The transition from oral folklore encompassing myths, folk song and rituals to written forms began in the mid-20th century, spurred by revival movements such as the Tripura Janasiksha Samiti (1945) and the recognition of Kokborok as a state language in 1979. Early efforts focused on grammars and translations, with *Hachuk Khurio* marking the first modern novel. Serialized in the magazine *Kwtal Kothoma* (1954), it depicts rural life, hill landscapes, and Borok resilience, blending realism with cultural motifs. Debbarma's multi-part series (Parts I-IV) set a foundation, exploring themes of social obligations, spirituality, and ethnic pride.

The 1980s and 1990s represented a growth phase (Periods IV-V), with novels like Shyamlal Debbarma's *Khong* (1996), and Tongthai Naitungwi (2007), Nanda Kumar Debbarma's *Rung* (2001), and Kunjabihari Debbarma's *Mwnakni Pohor* (2002). These works addressed rural struggles, historical folklore, migration, and environmental harmony, often fusing traditional oral elements with modern narratives. Authors such as Sunil Debbarma Langmani Rukungo, (2003), Atul Debbarma 1980 (2006), and Sefali Debbarma (Lokhopoti, 2010) expanded genres, tackling political marginalization, gender roles, and insurgency.

In the 21st century (Period VI, 2000s–2020s), contemporary novels by writers like Bijoy Debbarma Dolai Twima Naro, (2008).

Key words: Kokborok, indigenous language of the borok (Tripuri) people of Tripura, Northeast India, Kokborok novel, Kokborok literature.

Introduction

Kokborok, the indigenous language of the Borok (also known as Tripuri or Tipra) people primarily residing in the Indian state of Tripura and parts of neighbouring Bangladesh, is a Tibeto-Burman language rich in oral traditions. Its literature, deeply intertwined with the cultural, social, and political identity of the Borok community, has evolved from ancient folklore and myths to modern written forms. While poetry, folktales, and songs dominated early expressions, the novel as a genre emerged relatively late, reflecting the

community's transition from oral to literate societies amid colonial influences, post-independence challenges, and globalization.

The Kokborok novel serves as a mirror to the Borok people's struggles, including land displacement due to immigration, cultural erosion, ethnic conflicts, and the quest for autonomy. The first recognized modern Kokborok novel, *Hachuk Khurio* (In the Lap of the Hills), marks the beginning of this journey. Often dated to 1987 in terms of initial composition or serialization, its formal publication occurred in 1987 by the Kokborok Sahitya Sabha. Authored by Sudhanwa Debbarma, this work laid the foundation for a burgeoning literary tradition that has since produced dozens of novels. This survey traces the evolution of Kokborok novels from *Hachuk Khurio* to contemporary works up to 2025, examining key texts, authors, themes, and the socio-cultural context. By 2025, over 20 novels have been published, with a surge in digital and youth-driven narratives, highlighting the genre's vitality despite challenges like limited readership and standardization issues.

Historical Background: From Oral Roots to Written Novels

Before the advent of novels, Kokborok literature thrived in oral forms, including folktales, ballads, and myths that preserved the Borok worldview. These narratives often revolved around creation stories, moral lessons, and harmony with nature, as seen in tales like *Chethuang* (a foundational myth of the Borok people) and *Nuai* (stories of animals and humans). The shift to written literature began in the 19th century under British colonial influence, with early scripts adapted from Bengali or Roman alphabets. Pioneers like Radhamohan Thakur and Daulat Ahmed contributed to grammar and early writings in the early 20th century.

The post-independence era, particularly after Tripura's accession to India in 1949, saw ethnic tensions rise due to Bengali immigration, which marginalized the Borok population. This context fueled a cultural renaissance, leading to the establishment of the Kokborok Sahitya Sabha in 1976 and the recognition of Kokborok as an official language in Tripura in 1979. The inclusion of Kokborok in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2004 further boosted literary production. Novels emerged as a vehicle for articulating these identity crises, blending oral elements with modern storytelling techniques influenced by Bengali and English literature.

The Pioneering Work: Hachuk Khurio and Its Legacy

Published in parts starting from 1975 (with full compilation in 1987), *Hachuk Khurio* by Sudhanwa Debbarma is hailed as the "father" of Kokborok novels. Sudhanwa, often regarded as the "pioneer of modern Kokborok literature," drew from his experiences as a teacher and activist. The novel depicts the idyllic yet challenging life in Tripura's hills, focusing on a Borok family's daily struggles, social customs, and the encroaching forces of modernization. Themes of harmony with nature (*Hachuk* meaning hills) and resistance to cultural dilution are central, with vivid descriptions of rituals, agriculture, and community bonds.

The narrative structure borrows from oral storytelling, using episodic chapters that mimic folktales, but introduces character development and social commentary absent in traditional forms. For instance, the protagonist's journey reflects the Borok's broader fight against displacement. Sudhanwa expanded the series with sequels: *Hachuk Khurio II* (1994), III, and IV, each delving deeper into evolving societal issues like education and inter-community relations. This work not only popularized the novel form but also encouraged other writers to explore prose fiction, setting a precedent for realism in Kokborok literature.

Early Developments: The 1980s and 1990s

Following *Hachuk Khurio*, the 1980s and 1990s saw a gradual increase in novels, often published through local presses or the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC). Authors like Shyamlal Debbarma and Nanda Kumar Debbarma emerged, focusing on historical and social themes. Shyamlal's *Tongthai Naitugwi* (2007, but rooted in earlier drafts) explores personal quests amid cultural upheaval, blending adventure with introspection.

Other notable works include Chethuang by Sudhanwa Debbarma (an adaptation of the myth into novel form) and Rung (2001) by Nanda Kumar Debbarma, which addresses cultural identity and resistance. The 1990s introduced more diversity, with novels like Langmani Rukungo (2003) by Sunil Debbarma, portraying rural hardships, and Mwnakni Pohor (2002) by Kunjabihari Debbarma, emphasizing family dynamics. These early novels were typically short (100-200 pages), written in Bengali script, and circulated within Tripura, reflecting limited resources but growing literary consciousness.

The ethnic riots of 1980, a pivotal event in Tripura's history, influenced works like 1980 (2006) by Atul Debbarma, a semi-historical novel depicting violence and reconciliation. This period marked the transition from foundational realism to more nuanced explorations of trauma and resilience.

Expansion in the 2000s: Diversity and Thematic Depth

The 2000s witnessed a proliferation of novels, aided by institutional support from Tripura University (which established a Kokborok department in 1994) and increased literacy. Authors experimented with genres, incorporating elements of romance, eco-criticism, and feminism. Key texts include Dolai Twima Naro (2008) by Bijoy Debbarma, which examines tradition versus modernity, and Lokhopoti (2010) by Shefali Debbarma, one of the first prominent female voices, highlighting gender roles and empowerment.

Contemporary Works: 2010-2025 – Modernity, Digital Influence, and New Voices

From 2010 to 2025, Kokborok literature has witnessed continuous creative contributions from new and emerging writers. Works in various genres- such as short stories, poetry, essays, and others- have been consistently published during this period, including novels.

One notable novel is Hamjakmungni Hachuk, written by Shefali Debbarma and published in 2016. The novel vividly portrays the lifestyle, customs, and daily experiences of the Tripura (Borok/Tripuri) communities.

Recurring Themes and Motifs

Across decades, Kokborok novels emphasize rootedness to land (hachuk), cultural preservation, and resistance to assimilation. Eco-criticism is prevalent, portraying forests as sacred spaces threatened by development. Gender dynamics evolve from traditional roles to feminist critiques, while historical traumas like the 1980 riots recur as motifs of memory and healing. Oral traditions infuse narratives, with myths interwoven into plots, ensuring cultural continuity.

Key Authors and Their Contributions

i. Sudhanwa Debbarma: In Kokborok literature, Sudhanwa Debbarma is regarded as the pioneer and founding figure of the novel. His early novel "Chethuwang" was published between 1954-1956. Later, "Hachuk Khurio," published in 1987, came to be recognized as the first full-fledged novel in Kokborok literature. These works laid the foundation for the development of the Kokborok novel and occupy a seminal place in its literary history.

ii. Shyamlal Debbarma: In the field of Kokborok novel writing, the name of Shyamlal Debbarma is regarded with great respect and prominence. His first published novel, "Khong," appeared in 1996, followed by his second novel, "Tongthai Naitukgui," which was published in 2007. Through these works, Debbarma has made a significant contribution to the development and enrichment of Kokborok literature.

iii. Nanda Kumar Debbarma: The renowned writer Nanda Kumar Debbarma has published two novels. His first novel, "Rung," was published in 2001, and his second novel, "Bwbagwrasa," appeared in 2018. These works reflect his sustained contribution to Kokborok literature and demonstrate the thematic and artistic development of his literary career.

iv. Kunju Bihari Debbarma: Kunju Bihari Debbarma has published three novels. His first novel, "Mwnakni Pohor," was published in 2002, followed by "Halok" in 2004. In 2009, he published another novel titled "Surang." Together, these works represent his significant contribution to the development of Kokborok novel writing.

v. Sefali Debbarma: In Kokborok literature, the name of Sefali Debbarma is mentioned with great respect among women writers. She is recognized as the first female novelist in Kokborok literature. Her first published novel, "Lokhopoti," 2010, "Khorang Bwkcha Khalwng" in 2015 and "Hamjakmung Ni Hachuk" in 2016. Through her writings, she has given a powerful voice to indigenous life and articulated the experiences, struggles, and perspectives of tribal women, thereby enriching Kokborok literature with a distinct feminist and cultural consciousness.

vi. Atul Debbarma: In the field of novel writing in Kokborok literature, the name of Atul Debbarma is held in high esteem. His first published novel, "1980," was published in 2005. "Mungkwrwi," written in 2023, and "Dungur Dam 5G," published in 2024. Through his novels, Debbarma has given a strong voice to the issues of oppression, exploitation, and injustice faced by the indigenous community, thereby using literature as a means of social critique and resistance.

vii. Bijoy Debbarma: Bijoy Debbarma published his novel "Dolai Twima Naro" in 2008. The novel adds to his literary contribution and holds an important place within the corpus of Kokborok fiction.

viii. Sunil Debbarma: Sunil Debbarma published his novel "Langmani Rukungo" in 2003. This work represents his contribution to Kokborok novel writing and reflects the thematic concerns of his literary engagement.

ix. Prabir Kumar Debbarma: 'Khapangni Mari' which was published in 2016. This novel holds particular significance as it reflects the author's literary contribution and offers insight into the thematic concerns and cultural context that inform his writing.

x. Chandramani Debbarma: The novel "Sokorom," written in 2020, offers a profound and nuanced portrayal of Tripuri society. Through this work, the author presents an in-depth exploration of the social structure, cultural values, traditions, and everyday life of the Tripuri tribal community. The novel sensitively depicts the indigenous way of life, highlighting their close relationship with nature, collective social practices, and cultural identity, thereby providing valuable insight into the lived experiences of the Tripuri people.

These authors, often activists, use novels for advocacy.

Conclusion

From Hachuk Khurio's humble beginnings in 1987 to the vibrant, multifaceted works of 2025, Kokborok novels have chronicled the Borok people's resilience and evolution. This genre not only preserves heritage but also engages with contemporary realities, ensuring Kokborok literature's place in India's multilingual tapestry. As digital avenues grow, the future holds potential for global outreach, amplifying these voices from the hills of Tripura.

A survey of Kokborok novels offers a vivid portrayal of the cultural, social, and historical journey of the Borok (Tripuri) community in Tripura. The first modern Kokborok novel, Hachuk Khurio ("In the Lap of Hills"), authored by Sudhanwa Debbarma (also spelled Sudhanya or Sudhanwa) and published in 1987, authentically captures rural Tripuri life, the hilly landscape, and emerging social challenges. It lays the foundation for the novel genre in Kokborok literature, preserving traditional lifestyles while addressing the impacts of change.

Kokborok novel literature symbolizes the transition from oral traditions to written forms. With Kokborok gaining official state language status in 1979 and its inclusion in education, this literature has developed steadily, albeit gradually. It not only preserves the richness of Borok culture but also amplifies marginalized voices within mainstream literature. In the future, with contributions from young writers and greater institutional support, this literature is poised to become even more enriched and recognized on a global scale. Kokborok novels stand as a testament to the vitality and resilience of Borok society.

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