



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Literature

TRACING THE RICH HERITAGE: THE EVOLUTION OF KOKBOROK DRAMA IN TRIPURA.

KEY WORDS: *Kokborok* drama, Tripura, indigenous language, culture evolution, folk performances, contemporary theatre.

Smt. Barna Rani Jamatia

Guest Faculty, M.B.B. college. Department of Kokborok, Tripura.

Sri. Mani Debbarma

Guest Faculty, N.S. Mahavidyalaya, Department of Kokborok, Tripura.

ABSTRACT

This research article delves into the dynamic evolution of *Kokborok* drama in Tripura, India, shedding light on its journey from traditional folk performances to contemporary theatrical expressions. *Kokborok*, the indigenous language of the Tripuri community, possesses a rich cultural heritage that is deeply intertwined with various forms of performing arts. Through an extensive analysis of historical records, oral traditions, and contemporary practices, this study seeks to chronicle the development and transformation of *Kokborok* drama, emphasizing its cultural significance, thematic variations, and socio-political relevance.

INTRODUCTION:

The indigenous people of Tripura, India, have nurtured a distinctive cultural legacy rooted in their language, *Kokborok*, which encompasses a wide spectrum of traditional and contemporary artistic expressions. One of the prominent facets of this cultural heritage is *Kokborok* drama, which has evolved over time while preserving its unique characteristics. This research article investigates the historical progression of *Kokborok* drama, elucidating its role as a cultural mirror reflecting the evolution of the Tripuri society.

Cultural Context:

Kokborok drama is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the Tripuri people, serving as a means of communication, entertainment, and social commentary. Traditionally, these dramas were performed during festivals, rituals, and special occasions, often portraying mythological stories, moral lessons, and communal values. The socio-cultural context in which these performances took place played a pivotal role in shaping the themes, narratives, and aesthetics of *Kokborok* drama.

Drama serves as a powerful means to bring historical incidents and events back into the collective consciousness of society. The indigenous culture and traditions of the people of Tripura are deeply rooted in *Jhum* cultivation, which is pervasive throughout their way of life. Consequently, a significant portion of the dramas produced is closely intertwined with the ancient customs of the community. For instance, plays like *Khumpui*, *Kuchuk Hasikam*, *Nobar domsani kothoma*, and *Swkal* are all deeply rooted in the culture, traditions, and behaviors of the people. Recognizing the importance of drama as a vital tool, it becomes clear that its role in the development and progress of indigenous societies cannot be overstated.

Evolution And Adaptation:

Over the years, *Kokborok* drama has undergone significant evolution and adaptation in response to changing societal dynamics. The influence of modernity, urbanization, and globalization has led to the incorporation of new themes, styles, and techniques in *Kokborok* drama. The transition from open-air performances to stage productions in theatres has facilitated experimentation and innovation, allowing the art form to remain relevant and engaging for contemporary audiences.

In the history of *Kokborok* drama, its origins can be traced back to the practice of *Jatra*. Initially, drama in the *Kokborok* language was influenced by the influx of external influences, particularly from the Bengali culture. Over time, this influence led to the transformation of *Jatra* into a distinct form of drama within the *Kokborok* tradition.

The long-standing interactions between the people of Tripura and the Bengali community played a significant role in shaping the culture and lifestyle of the Tripura people. These interactions resulted in a gradual fusion of Bengali elements into the *Tripuri* society, including language. This cultural amalgamation was facilitated through the medium of '*Gainpala*,' which translates to the "performance of drama." As a result of this cultural exchange, drama in Bengali language became a prominent feature, reflecting the adoption of Bengali cultural elements.

Furthermore, the assimilation of culture, language, and literature became a common practice among the people of Tripura, leading to the saturation of these aspects within their own *Kokborok* language and culture. Notably, even the royal families and the kings of Tripura were known to have an affinity for Bengali literature. The Bengali language had been adopted within the royal households for an extended period, eventually acquiring the status of a royal language. This adoption of Bengali language and culture had a profound influence on the lifestyle of the Tripuri society, particularly through the practice of '*Gainpala*.'

In the historical context of Tripura, the initial dramas performed by Bengali artists included tales such as *Ramayan*, *Raban Badha* from *Mahabharat*, *Sita Haran*, and *Taranisen*. These performances were deeply rooted in the veneration of deities and their worship, reflecting the spiritual and mythological aspects of the culture.

Themes And Narratives:

The thematic content of *Kokborok* drama has evolved to reflect not only traditional values and cultural narratives but also contemporary issues and concerns. While mythological stories and legends remain a vital component, modern *Kokborok* drama addresses topics such as identity, cultural preservation, socio-economic challenges, and political discourse. This transformation highlights the adaptability of *Kokborok* drama in addressing the evolving aspirations of the Tripuri community. Several dramas have played a pivotal role in preserving Tripuri's cultural identity. Works such as "*Selersa*" and "*Thwini-phota*" have been highly regarded in the society, although, these dramas were not documented in written form, making them inaccessible for contemporary viewing and performance.

The first documented drama, "*Egiye Cholo*," emerged in 1948, authored by Sudhanwa Debbarma. This significant drama was composed in *Kokborok* and was later translated into Bengali. Performers showcased their talent in both dialects. "*Egiye Cholo*" revolved around a movement against nefarious activities, reflecting the spirit of resistance within the narrative.

Another noteworthy written drama, "*Porikhit Bidruho*," delved into the riots incited by the Jamatia community against the established system under the rule of the King. Although it was not performed, it was preserved in the *Kokborok* language.

However, the period between 1947 and 1971 was marked by significant historical events, including the Indian movement, World War II, and the 1964-65 conflict between Pakistan and India. Tripura, having merged with India in 1949, also felt the impact of these events. Consequently, only a limited number of dramas were written during this turbulent period, and some writers were compelled to distance themselves from the craft.

In 1971, the tradition of drama writing was reignited among the youth, culminating in the creation of the remarkable drama "*Lamani Homchang*" by Alindralal Tripura in 1973. This production was staged on October 11th at the Rabindra Satabasiki Bhaban, marking the inauguration of Proscenium Theater in the region.

Subsequently, in 1974, Jagath Basi Jamatia penned "*Kalijuk*," followed by Subudlal Jamatia's "*Thwi Phota*" in 1975. Additionally, Shymalal Debbarma contributed to this renaissance of drama writing with "*Bengswal*," written in 1974. These works collectively played a crucial role in revitalizing the dramatic arts and cultural expression in Tripura.

Unfortunately, a sudden shift in the political landscape of Tripura in 1980, accompanied by outbreaks of riots, led to a period of silence in literature creation among the indigenous population. However, in 1983, there was a resurgence of literary activity with the revival of the drama "*Nokbar Domsani Kothoma*," an initiative led by Mr. Narendra Debbarma.

In the subsequent year, 1984, Nanda Kumar Debbarma contributed to this literary revival by creating the drama "*Mari*." Additionally, a poem titled "*Kok Kisa Koktanghai*" was penned during the same year. In the present day, the field of literature in Tripura continues to evolve, with many new dramas being written to reflect the current scenarios and the ever-changing situations faced by the people. This ongoing creative expression plays a vital role in capturing and interpreting the contemporary experiences of the community.

Socio-Political Significance:

Kokborok drama plays a multifaceted role, not only as a form of entertainment but also as a socio-political platform through which the *Tripuri* people can articulate their concerns, express their aspirations, and shed light on their struggles. These dramas have become a vital means of preserving indigenous identity and asserting cultural rights. The blending of tradition and modernity within *Kokborok* drama has proven to be a potent tool for mobilizing communities and advocating for their causes. Within the realm of literature, drama holds a pivotal position and can be regarded as a guiding light for society. It serves as a medium through which the ancient customs and laws of the community are vividly highlighted.

In the rich tapestry of *Kokborok* literature, the drama "*Egiye Cholu*" stands as an exemplar. This dramatic work is rooted in historical events, culture, and geographical settings, providing a window into the ancestral narratives that underpin contemporary identities. "*Egiye Cholu*" specifically delves into the oppressive policies of the monarchy, drawing from real incidents that transpired in Gulagati, a western region of Tripura, where a conflict erupted between farmers and the ruling authority.

Furthermore, drama has proven to be a valuable tool for conveying the customs and lifestyles of past generations, offering a vivid window into their way of life. A compelling example of this is the drama "*Ekalobya*," crafted by the renowned writer Nanda Kumar Debbarma. Through his

writing, Debbarma effectively illustrates and describes the societal beliefs and intentions of his era.

In "*Ekalobya*," the playwright explores social inequalities in education, with a focus on how the royal family had access while the lower class did not. The central character, Ekalobya, is exceptionally gifted but excluded from formal education. The story revolves around Bishma establishing a school for his grandsons, led by Guru Drun. Ekalobya self-initiates his education, but when Drun becomes jealous of his skills, he deceitfully asks for Ekalobya's thumb as a token of respect. This tale illustrates the barriers faced by marginalized individuals in education and the consequences of jealousy.

In "*Ekalobya*," the playwright delves into the social structure, particularly the educational system, highlighting the disparities in access to learning. He emphasizes how education was readily available to the royal family but denied to the lower strata of society. The central character, Ekalobya, hailing from a humble background, is exceptionally gifted in learning but remains excluded from formal education. The storyline unfolds as Bishma, the grandfather of the prince, establishes a school in the mountains of Longtra, guided by the teacher Guru Drun. Drun is tasked with instructing Bishma's five grandsons in the art of using a catapult. Inspired by their learning, Ekalobya, though receiving no formal training, self-initiates his education and reveres Drun as his mentor.

However, when Drun realizes that Ekalobya surpasses his royal students in skill and knowledge, jealousy takes hold, leading him to devise a malicious plan. He cunningly asks for Ekalobya's right-hand thumb as Guru Dakshina (a token of respect to the teacher). The innocent boy, out of profound respect, willingly sacrifices his thumb as Guru Dakshina. This poignant tale serves as a stark reminder of the extent to which jealousy and discrimination can go when someone from a marginalized background excels beyond their peers. It underscores the systemic barriers faced by lower-class individuals in accessing education and opportunities.

Kokborok drama has played a pivotal role in preserving history, culture, and customs while also serving as a medium to open the eyes of society to important social issues and injustices. Through the medium of drama, the intricate tapestry of the past is woven into the fabric of the present, fostering understanding and empathy among the audience.

Contemporary Practices:

Kokborok drama persists and evolves in the modern era, benefiting from digital platforms and renewed interest in indigenous cultures. This art form maintains its authenticity while embracing contemporary tools. Drama serves as a reflection of society, offering a platform to convey a wide range of human emotions and experiences, imparting valuable lessons to its audience. The ancient text "*Natyastra*" by Acharya Bharatmuni emphasizes that drama encompasses elements of ideology, literature, and education. It not only entertains but also plays a crucial role in imparting moral knowledge, nurturing critical thinking, defining concepts of good and bad, and contributing to character development in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION:

The evolution of *Kokborok* drama in Tripura is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of indigenous cultural expressions in the face of changing times. From its origins in traditional folk performances to its contemporary manifestation, *Kokborok* drama has retained its cultural significance while responding to the evolving needs of the *Tripuri* community. As custodians of this rich heritage, it is essential to continue supporting and celebrating *Kokborok* drama as an integral part of Tripura's cultural mosaic.

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