

LEGAL PROTECTION OF “KOKBOROK”: THE PRIDE OF NORTHEAST INDIA

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Abstract

Kokborok (with its origins in the Tibeto-Burman family) happens to be the language of the indigenous people of Tripura. Its core area is situated in Tripura, and the periphery areas are spread in the neighbouring Indian states of Assam and Mizoram. In the hilly tracts of the Chittagong area of Bangladesh, the language is also spoken. Despite being the foundation of the cultural identity of the indigenous people, it is exposed to the risk of endangerment because it remains mostly undocumented. On 19 January 1979, the language achieved official status, but despite that, the fact remains that it is not widely used in financial and social institutions, television, press or educational institutions. Kokborok language possesses unique characteristic features and traits via which it adapts to the changing environmental situations and conditions despite its low linguistic vitality.

Keywords: *Culture, Heritage, Migration, Kokborok, Endangered, Linguistic Minority.*

INTRODUCTION

The “Kokborok” happens to be the mother tongue of the people of the Tripuris and the tribal communities like Jamatia, Reang, etc. Etymologically, “Kokborok” is derived from the root “Kok” meaning “language” and “Borok” meaning “people” (signifying the Borok people). These days, it is primarily written in the Bengali script, but originally and historically, it used the “Koloma” script.

Kokborok is supposed to have existed since the 1st century AD, and a few of the masterpieces in the Tripuri literature were written in Kokborok (in Koloma script), like the “Rajratnakar”, which happens to be a chronicle of the Tripura Kings (written by Durlobendra Chontai). The

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state of Tripura has a total of 19 (nineteen) scheduled tribes, and among them, “Kokborok” is the most spoken tribal language.

As per the reports of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), endangerment of the indigenous language is at an alarming stage, and one indigenous language dies every two weeks.

Northeastern region’s indigenous languages happen to be at the peak of extinction as per the report of Tribal cultural heritage of India’s 600 potentially endangered languages.

In India, factually speaking, the reality remains that out of the 170 languages of India under threat of extinction, nearly half of the languages belong to the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages of northeast India.

What aggravates the situation for these endangered languages is very often the lack of proper script, literary tradition and the required state support.

In many cases, the cause and reason of the linguistic inequality among the various languages can be attributed to the process of institutionalisation via the constitutional and statutory recognition of a few of them and leaving others, especially the tribal languages.

Many times, the number games with regard to the minority languages also play a role in granting the statutory recognition (with exceptions of English and Sanskrit, one being the predominant language in the globalised era and the other being the language of the ceremonial rituals and religious worship), leading to the loss of vitality of the concerned language.

INTERNATIONAL LEGAL PROVISIONS

So far as the legal protection of endangered languages is concerned, there exists no specific legal framework as such which can directly aid in the protection of endangered languages, but this issue has been approached in a different manner by protecting the interests of the linguistic minorities.

Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, suggests that linguistic minorities shall not be denied the use of their own culture, profess and practice their own religion.

United Nations General Assembly, by its resolution 47/135 of 18-22-ts, made it obligatory for the states to protect the identities (linguistic identities) of the minorities. It mandates that the states should enact legislation in their own countries for the protection of linguistic identities.

Similarly, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage, 2003, focuses on the protection and preservation of the “intangible cultural heritage”, including oral traditions, expressions, performing arts and language.

The strategy which has been adopted to advance this vision is “identification”, “policy making” and “educational promotion”, i.e. identification of the intangible cultural heritage, appropriate policy making and educational promotion.

NATIONAL LEGAL PROVISIONS

India, being a signatory to the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Religious and Linguistic minorities 1992, was obliged to implement that, and therefore, in 1992, the National Commission of Minority Act, 1992 was enacted. But unfortunately, the Act also laid more emphasis on the religious minorities and not the linguistic minorities, e.g. “Sindhi”, despite being a linguistic minority, did not get any protection and focus in the concerned Act, and only six religious minority languages got mention in this Act.

So far as the Constitution of India is concerned, it does not define the expressions “minority” or “endangered language”, but it expressly provides for safeguards and protection to the minorities through its Part III. It provides for the protection of minorities, their culture and language.

Article 29 of the Constitution of India provides for the protection of the interests of minorities.

Similarly, Article 30 of the Constitution of India provides for the Right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions.

The basic idea behind having all these legal provisions in place is that language is not just a medium to express or simply a mode of communication, but also an instrument to shape the cultural, social and economic identity of individuals.

Another provision that acts as a supplement to Article 29 of the Constitution of India is Article 350-A, which makes provision for providing instructions to the students in their mother tongue.

CHALLENGES

Primary challenges facing the Kokborok language are the declining use of the language amongst the youngsters. As the families shift to the urban areas looking for a better quality of life in comparison to the rural ones, the younger generations are more exposed to the dominant languages. This, in turn, makes them lose the opportunity to learn the language organically through daily interactions.

Since Kokborok has recently been introduced in the academic curriculum, proper care needs to be taken so that well-experienced mentors and teachers are appointed who can take care of the authenticity of the language and also provide the necessary thrust to ensure its transmission to the next generation.

Another major challenge happens to be the dominance of global and regional languages like Bengali, English and Hindi, which are very often prioritised because of the socio-economic and academic advantages. This can be handled properly by increasing the presence of the Kokborok language in media, government institutions and academic circles.

Another major challenge happens to be the revitalisation of the “Koloma” script, which is the original script of the Kokborok language. What is required is the effective standardisation of the script issue, which would facilitate high-quality literary work, resources and educational material. In this regard, the digital media can be of great help as various “apps” and other electronic tools can be used to teach grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary, thereby making the language more accessible to the non-Kokborok speaking population.

Another important step can be the integration of Kokborok in the academic curricula so that it gets assimilated as a modern academic discipline.

CONCLUSION

For the long-term effectivity and success of the preservation of “Kokborok” language what is required is the collaborative efforts between the community stakeholders and the government bodies as the governmental initiative can provide for the sustainable development of the

language and the community stakeholders can play their part in regard to the cultural knowledge and grassroots engagement relating to “Kokborok”.

Similar efforts and initiatives were taken with respect to different endangered languages worldwide (e.g., the Maori language in New Zealand), and magical results were achieved, resulting in the integration of endangered languages into modern educational curricula and digital space.

International organisations like SIL (Safety Integrity Level) International and Endangered Languages Project can also provide the necessary network, expertise and resources for the revitalisation of the “Kokborok”.

In a nutshell, one can suggest that revitalisation, preservation and survival of “Kokborok” depends on a perfect balance between innovation and tradition.

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