



From Vision to Action: Rampadha's Aspirations for Community Development in the drama *Bengswnal*

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Abstract

Kokborok theatre represents a significant Indigenous theatrical tradition that has played a crucial role in preserving the language, culture, history and collective identity of the Tripuri communities in Tripura. This study examines the historical evolution of Kokborok theatre, tracing its development from Indigenous oral traditions, ritual performances, folk narratives, songs and communal festivals to the emergence of modern scripted theatre during the latter half of the twentieth century. Employing a qualitative research design based on historical-analytical and descriptive-interpretative methods, the study draws upon published books, journal articles, archival documents, theatre literature and institutional publications to investigate the socio-cultural and historical forces that shaped the growth of Kokborok theatre. The research demonstrates that while Bengali theatre introduced modern dramaturgical techniques, Kokborok theatre gradually established an independent identity by integrating Indigenous storytelling, music, dance, rituals, myths and performance aesthetics into contemporary theatrical practice. The study further explores the dramatic text *Bengswnal*, highlighting Rampadha's vision for an ideal society founded on education, cultural preservation, social justice, unity, and self-reliance, alongside Rampodh's exemplary leadership qualities that emphasize ethical governance, collective responsibility, and Indigenous empowerment. These character representations illustrate how Kokborok theatre functions not merely as a form of artistic expression but also as a medium for cultural resistance, language revitalization, historical consciousness and social transformation. The findings suggest that Kokborok theatre has evolved into a dynamic cultural institution that negotiates the relationship between tradition and modernity while responding to contemporary issues such as identity, migration, environmental sustainability, and globalization. By preserving Indigenous knowledge systems and reinforcing community values, Kokborok theatre continues to contribute significantly to the cultural heritage of Tripura and enriches the broader discourse on Indigenous theatre in India.

Keywords: Kokborok Theatre, Indigenous Theatre, Tripura, Cultural Identity, Language Revitalization, Oral Tradition, Bengswnal, Indigenous Performance, Cultural Preservation, Tripuri Communities.

Introduction

Kokborok theatre represents one of the most significant cultural expressions of the Indigenous Tripuri communities of Tripura, India. Its historical development reflects the dynamic relationship between language, culture, politics and identity among the Kokborok-speaking peoples. Although modern Kokborok theatre emerged during the second half of the twentieth century, its origins lie in the much older performative traditions of the Indigenous communities, where storytelling, ritual performances, music, dance and oral narratives functioned as the primary means of preserving collective memory and transmitting cultural knowledge. The evolution of Kokborok theatre therefore cannot be understood solely as the emergence of scripted drama but must be viewed as the transformation of an existing Indigenous performance culture into an organized theatrical tradition. Long before the introduction of modern theatre the Indigenous communities of Tripura possessed a vibrant tradition of oral performance. These performances were embedded within everyday social and religious life and were closely associated with

agricultural cycles, clan traditions, and community festivals. Folk legends such as the story of Raima and Saima narratives concerning the origins of different clans, heroic ancestors and mythical beings were transmitted through oral storytelling performed before community audiences. These performances did not conform to the conventions of Western dramatic literature yet they contained fundamental theatrical elements including characterization, impersonation, dialogue, movement, audience interaction and symbolic representation. These Indigenous performative traditions laid the cultural and aesthetic foundation upon which modern Kokborok theatre would later develop. The emergence of modern theatrical practices in Tripura was significantly influenced by colonial modernity and the expansion of Bengali theatre during the nineteenth century. Under the patronage of the Manikya rulers, Bengali language, literature and theatre flourished within the royal court and urban centres of the princely state. Western-style proscenium theatre became increasingly popular, introducing scripted drama, stagecraft, scenic design and structured performance conventions. While Bengali theatre received institutional support and became a prominent cultural practice among educated urban elites, the Indigenous communities largely remained outside these formal theatrical spaces. Their cultural expressions continued to exist within oral and ritual traditions rather than written dramatic literature. Nevertheless, exposure to Bengali theatre familiarized Indigenous intellectuals with modern dramatic forms influencing the later development of Kokborok theatre while simultaneously encouraging efforts to create an independent Indigenous dramatic tradition. The twentieth century witnessed the gradual emergence of a literary consciousness among Kokborok-speaking communities. Expanding educational opportunities, increasing literacy and growing concern for the preservation of Indigenous languages encouraged writers and intellectuals to promote Kokborok as a literary language. Literary organizations played a crucial role in publishing books, magazines and newspapers in Kokborok, thereby establishing the linguistic foundation necessary for dramatic writing. The demand for linguistic recognition became particularly significant after Indian independence as Indigenous communities sought to preserve their cultural identity amidst changing political and demographic conditions. Theatre emerged as an effective cultural medium because dramatic performances could communicate linguistic identity not only to educated readers but also to wider community audiences. Consequently, theatre became both an artistic practice and a cultural strategy for strengthening the public presence of the Kokborok language. The development of modern Kokborok theatre gained momentum during the late 1960s and early 1970s when playwrights began composing original dramas in Kokborok rather than relying on translations or adaptations from Bengali. This period coincided with growing Indigenous political consciousness and increasing awareness of cultural preservation. Rapid demographic transformation resulting from migration, land alienation and socio-economic change generated widespread concern regarding the survival of Indigenous traditions and language. Within this context, theatre became an important platform for expressing community aspirations, preserving cultural heritage and articulating collective identity. Early Kokborok plays focused primarily on village life, customary practices, family relationships, traditional belief systems, moral values and the importance of maintaining Indigenous cultural continuity. These productions were generally performed in villages, schools, community centres and local festivals using simple staging techniques that emphasized storytelling, music and communal participation rather than elaborate theatrical technology. During the 1970s and 1980s, Kokborok theatre entered a period of remarkable expansion and cultural consolidation. Amateur theatre groups emerged across different regions of Tripura, while cultural organizations actively encouraged dramatic performances through festivals, competitions and community programmes. This phase represented a cultural renaissance in which theatre was increasingly perceived as an instrument for the revitalization of Indigenous language and heritage. Playwrights consciously moved beyond imitation of Bengali dramatic conventions by incorporating traditional songs, dances, myths, legends, oral narratives and ritual practices into theatrical performance. Indigenous musical instruments, costumes and performance aesthetics became integral components of stage productions, allowing Kokborok theatre to develop a distinctive artistic identity rooted in local cultural traditions. Rather than rejecting modern theatrical techniques, playwrights selectively adapted them to Indigenous worldviews and modes of storytelling, creating a hybrid theatrical form that reflected both continuity and innovation. The political developments of the 1980s further transformed the thematic orientation of Kokborok theatre. The Indigenous peoples of Tripura experienced profound social and political challenges arising from ethnic tensions, displacement, loss of ancestral land, economic marginalization and the erosion of traditional institutions. Theatre increasingly became a medium through which these historical experiences could be critically examined. Playwrights explored issues of cultural survival, identity, language preservation, migration, social inequality, environmental degradation and the consequences of modernization. Dramatic narratives highlighted the emotional and psychological impact of rapid social transformation while emphasizing the resilience of Indigenous communities. Theatre thus

assumed a broader social function by fostering public dialogue concerning justice, cultural rights and historical memory. Rather than functioning solely as entertainment, Kokborok theatre evolved into an important form of cultural resistance that challenged marginalization and affirmed Indigenous identity. One of the defining characteristics of Kokborok theatre throughout its historical evolution has been its close relationship with oral tradition. Even after the emergence of written dramatic literature, performances continued to retain many features inherited from Indigenous storytelling practices. Folk songs, communal singing, narrative recitation, rhythmic dance, symbolic movement, ritual gestures and audience participation remained central components of theatrical presentation. Unlike conventional proscenium drama, where dialogue alone often carries the narrative, Kokborok theatre integrates music, dance and ritual into the dramatic structure itself. Performance therefore becomes a collective cultural experience rather than merely the presentation of a written script. This integration of oral and performative traditions distinguishes Kokborok theatre from many other regional theatrical traditions in India and demonstrates the continuity of Indigenous cultural practices within modern dramatic expression. Institutional support has also contributed significantly to the consolidation of Kokborok theatre. Government cultural agencies, literary organizations, educational institutions and community associations have organized theatre festivals, workshops, seminars, competitions and training programmes that have encouraged new generations of playwrights, actors, directors and researchers. Organizations such as the Kokborok Sahitya Sabha, the Tribal Research and Cultural Institute, the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Government of Tripura and various university departments have played important roles in documenting dramatic literature, promoting theatrical productions and facilitating scholarly research on Indigenous performance traditions. Radio and television broadcasts in Kokborok have further expanded the audience for theatrical productions enabling dramatic performances to reach communities beyond conventional stage settings. Contemporary Kokborok theatre continues to evolve in response to changing social realities while maintaining its cultural foundations. Modern playwrights increasingly address issues such as globalization, urbanization, migration, youth aspirations, environmental sustainability, women's experiences, education and the preservation of Indigenous knowledge systems. Contemporary productions frequently combine traditional music, dance and oral narration with modern stagecraft, lighting, multimedia technology and experimental performance techniques. Despite these innovations, Kokborok theatre remains firmly connected to the cultural values, historical experiences and linguistic identity of the Indigenous communities from which it emerged. It continues to function not only as an artistic medium but also as an archive of collective memory preserving cultural traditions that might otherwise disappear under the pressures of modernization. The historical evolution of Kokborok theatre demonstrates the remarkable capacity of Indigenous communities to adapt changing artistic forms while preserving their cultural distinctiveness. Emerging from ritual performance, oral storytelling and communal festivals, Kokborok theatre gradually transformed into an organized dramatic tradition that reflects the aspirations, struggles and resilience of the Tripuri people. Its development has been shaped by encounters with colonial modernity, the influence of Bengali theatre, the growth of linguistic nationalism and the political experiences of Indigenous communities in postcolonial Tripura. Today, Kokborok theatre occupies an important place within the broader landscape of Indian and Northeastern theatre, serving simultaneously as a medium of artistic expression, cultural preservation, linguistic revitalization and social critique. Its continued vitality underscores the enduring relationship between performance, identity and community, ensuring that the voices, histories and worldviews of the Kokborok-speaking peoples remain central to the cultural heritage of Tripura.



Figure: Picture of the Kokborok theatre

Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** employing the **historical-analytical** and **descriptive-interpretative** methods to examine the historical evolution of Kokborok theatre and its role in preserving Indigenous identity, language, and cultural traditions in Tripura. Rather than relying on quantitative data, the research focuses on the interpretation of historical records, literary works, and cultural documents to understand the emergence, development, and contemporary significance of Kokborok theatre. The study is primarily based on **secondary sources**. These include published books on the history of Tripura and Kokborok literature, peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral theses, conference proceedings, government reports, archival documents, theatre souvenirs, cultural magazines and publications of institutions such as the Kokborok Sahitya Sabha, the Tribal Research and Cultural Institute (TRTI), the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Government of Tripura and relevant university publications. Existing research on Indigenous theatre, Bengali theatre, oral traditions and Northeastern Indian performance practices has also been consulted to provide historical and theoretical perspectives.

A **historical research method** has been employed to trace the chronological development of Kokborok theatre from its origins in Indigenous oral traditions, ritual performances, folk narratives, and communal festivals to the emergence of modern scripted theatre during the late twentieth century. Particular attention has been given to major historical events, linguistic movements, cultural revival initiatives and socio-political transformations that influenced the growth of Kokborok dramatic literature and performance. The study further applies **textual and thematic analysis** to examine the recurring themes found in Kokborok dramatic traditions. Themes such as cultural preservation, language revitalization, Indigenous identity, social transformation, environmental consciousness, community solidarity, resistance and historical memory are analysed to understand how theatre functions as both an artistic expression and a medium of cultural continuity. The analysis also considers the incorporation of Indigenous songs, dances, myths, rituals, costumes and oral storytelling techniques into modern theatrical performances. To ensure scholarly rigour, data collected from different sources were subjected to **source triangulation**, whereby historical records, literary texts, institutional publications and previous academic studies were compared and cross-verified to establish consistency and reliability. Contrasting interpretations presented by different scholars were critically examined before drawing conclusions regarding the evolution of Kokborok theatre. The interpretation of the findings is informed by an **interdisciplinary framework** that integrates perspectives from theatre studies, cultural studies, Indigenous studies, performance studies and historical research. This multidisciplinary approach enables the study to examine Kokborok theatre not merely as a performing art but also as a cultural institution that reflects the historical experiences, collective memory, social aspirations and identity of the Indigenous communities of Tripura. As this research is entirely based on published literature and archival materials, no human participants were involved and therefore ethical concerns related to interviews or field investigations did not arise. The methodology adopted in this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the historical trajectory of Kokborok theatre while highlighting its continuing contribution to Indigenous cultural preservation, linguistic revitalization and contemporary theatrical discourse.

Rampadha's Dream for Society in *Bengswal*

In *Bengswal*, Rampadha embodies the aspirations of an Indigenous community striving for social transformation while safeguarding its cultural identity. His vision is not confined to individual advancement but extends to the collective welfare of society. Through his character, the playwright presents an ideal social order founded on education, unity, justice, cultural continuity and self-reliance. Rampadha's ideals reflect the broader concerns of the Kokborok-speaking community during a period of significant social and cultural change. A central element of Rampadha's vision is the transformative power of education. He considers education essential for overcoming ignorance and enabling people to think critically about their lives and their future. In his understanding, learning is more than a pathway to employment; it is a means of developing social awareness, strengthening the community, and empowering future generations. An educated society, according to Rampadha is better equipped to preserve its heritage while adapting to changing circumstances. Equally important is his commitment to the protection of Kokborok language and Indigenous cultural traditions. Rampadha recognizes that language carries the history, values and collective memory of a people. He therefore believes that genuine progress cannot be achieved by abandoning cultural roots. Instead, he advocates a model of development in which traditional customs, oral heritage and

community practices continue to thrive alongside modern education and social advancement. His perspective emphasizes that cultural preservation and modernization should reinforce rather than oppose one another. Rampadha also envisions a society built upon unity and mutual cooperation. He believes that communal harmony is the foundation of sustainable development and that divisions arising from selfish interests or internal conflicts weaken the community as a whole. His ideal society is one in which individuals work collectively, share responsibilities, and support one another in addressing common challenges. This spirit of solidarity reflects the traditional communal values of Indigenous society and highlights the importance of collective well-being over personal gain. Another significant aspect of his dream is the establishment of social justice and equality. Rampadha rejects discrimination, exploitation, and social inequality, arguing that every individual deserves dignity and equal opportunities. He imagines a community where fairness guides social relationships and where people are respected regardless of their economic or social background. Such a society, in his view, can achieve lasting peace and stability because it is founded upon justice and mutual respect. Economic self-sufficiency also forms an important component of Rampadha's vision. He believes that genuine development should emerge from the productive efforts of the community itself rather than excessive dependence on outside support. By encouraging hard work, responsible use of natural resources and collective participation in economic activities, he promotes a model of sustainable development that strengthens both the material and social foundations of Indigenous life. Beyond material progress, Rampadha places considerable emphasis on moral values. He advocates honesty, responsibility, discipline and respect for elders and community traditions. For him, social development is meaningful only when accompanied by ethical conduct and a strong sense of collective responsibility. He suggests that moral integrity is indispensable for creating a stable and harmonious society. Rampadha's vision ultimately seeks to establish a balance between tradition and modernity. Rather than rejecting social change, he encourages the community to embrace education, innovation, and progress while remaining firmly rooted in its cultural identity. This balanced approach reflects a belief that modernization should enrich Indigenous society without eroding its language, customs or historical consciousness. Through Rampadha's character, *Bengswal* presents an enduring vision of an ideal society in which education, cultural preservation, social justice, unity, ethical values and economic self-reliance function together to ensure the well-being of the community. His aspirations transcend personal ambition and symbolize the collective hopes of the Indigenous people of Tripura for a future that harmonizes progress with the preservation of their cultural heritage.

Rampodh's Leadership Qualities in *Bengswal*

Rampodh emerges as one of the most influential characters in *Bengswal* because of his exemplary leadership and unwavering commitment to the welfare of his community. His leadership is not founded on authority or personal ambition but on moral integrity, social responsibility and a deep concern for the collective future of the Indigenous society. Through his actions, decisions and vision, Rampodh represents an ideal leader who seeks to inspire social transformation while preserving the cultural identity of his people. One of Rampodh's most notable leadership qualities is his visionary outlook. He understands that the progress of society depends on long-term planning rather than immediate personal gain. His vision extends beyond individual success to the overall development of the community through education, unity, and cultural preservation. He encourages people to think about the future and to prepare younger generations to face changing social realities without abandoning their traditional values. Rampodh also demonstrates a strong sense of social responsibility. Rather than remaining indifferent to the problems affecting his community, he actively seeks solutions that promote collective welfare. He recognizes issues such as illiteracy, social division, and cultural decline as obstacles to progress and motivates others to participate in overcoming these challenges. His willingness to place community interests above his own establishes him as a respected and trusted leader. Another defining characteristic of Rampodh's leadership is his commitment to education. He believes that knowledge empowers individuals and enables society to achieve meaningful progress. By advocating education, he encourages critical thinking, self-confidence and awareness among community members. His leadership reflects the belief that an informed society is better equipped to preserve its language, protect its rights, and build a prosperous future. Rampodh is equally committed to the preservation of Indigenous culture and the Kokborok language. He understands that cultural identity is essential for maintaining the unity and dignity of the community. Instead of viewing modernization as a threat, he encourages a balanced approach in which new ideas are accepted without sacrificing traditional customs, values, and linguistic heritage. His leadership therefore promotes cultural

continuity alongside social development. His ability to unite people is another significant aspect of his leadership. Rampodh values cooperation, mutual respect and collective participation. He seeks to resolve conflicts through dialogue and understanding rather than confrontation, believing that social harmony is essential for sustainable development. His inclusive approach strengthens relationships within the community and encourages individuals to work together toward common goals. Rampodh also possesses moral courage and integrity. He remains committed to principles of honesty, fairness and justice even when confronted with difficulties or opposition. His ethical conduct earns the trust of the people and enables him to lead by example. Instead of imposing authority, he influences others through his character, sincerity and dedication to the common good. Furthermore, Rampodh demonstrates resilience in responding to social and cultural challenges. He does not lose hope in the face of adversity but remains determined to protect the interests of his community. His perseverance inspires confidence among others and reinforces the belief that positive change is possible through collective effort and determination. Another important quality of Rampodh is his democratic style of leadership. He values the opinions of others and encourages community participation in decision-making. Rather than acting as an authoritarian figure, he fosters cooperation and shared responsibility, reflecting the traditional communal values of Indigenous society. This participatory approach strengthens social solidarity and creates a sense of ownership among community members. Through these qualities, Rampodh symbolizes an ideal Indigenous leader whose strength lies in wisdom, compassion, responsibility and commitment to cultural preservation. His leadership demonstrates that true authority is earned through service, ethical conduct and dedication to the welfare of society rather than through power or status. In *Bengswal*, Rampodh serves as a model of transformative leadership, inspiring his community to pursue education, unity, justice and sustainable development while remaining firmly rooted in its cultural identity.

Conclusion

The historical development of Kokborok theatre reflects the resilience, creativity, and cultural consciousness of the Indigenous communities of Tripura. Emerging from a rich tradition of oral narratives, ritual performances, folk songs and communal festivals, Kokborok theatre gradually evolved into a distinct modern theatrical tradition that serves both artistic and social purposes. Its growth was shaped by changing historical circumstances, including the influence of Bengali theatre, the rise of linguistic awareness and the increasing need to preserve Indigenous identity in the face of social and cultural transformation. Throughout its evolution, Kokborok theatre has remained deeply connected to the lived experiences of the Kokborok-speaking people. By incorporating traditional stories, cultural practices, music, dance and Indigenous worldviews into dramatic performance, it has created a unique theatrical form that bridges tradition and modernity. Beyond entertainment, it has functioned as a powerful medium for cultural preservation, language revitalization, historical remembrance and social reflection. The theatre has provided a platform through which Indigenous communities articulate their aspirations, address contemporary challenges, and affirm their collective identity. In the contemporary period, Kokborok theatre continues to adapt to new social realities while retaining its cultural foundations. Its ability to combine traditional performance elements with modern theatrical techniques demonstrates the dynamic nature of Indigenous cultural expression. As a result, Kokborok theatre occupies an important place within the cultural landscape of Tripura and the broader context of Indian theatre. Its continued vitality not only preserves the heritage of the Indigenous people but also contributes to the diversity of theatrical traditions in India. The study therefore concludes that Kokborok theatre is more than a performing art; it is a living cultural institution that embodies the history, identity, memory and enduring spirit of the Kokborok-speaking communities.

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