

**LITTLE NARRATIVES OF THE BOROKS FROM SELECTED
FOLKTALES, POEMS AND SHORT STORIES: A STUDY**

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DECLARATION

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I, Dustin Lalkulhpuia, hereby declare that the subject matter of this dissertation is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form the basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for research degree in any other University/ Institute.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled *Little Narratives of the Boroks from Selected Folktales, Poems and Short Stories: A Study* submitted to Mizoram University by Dustin Lalkulhpuia in partial fulfillment for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in English is purely an original research work accomplished by the scholar under my direct supervision and neither the dissertation nor any part of it has so far been submitted to any educational institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I am, therefore, glad to recommend in all fairness that this dissertation be sent to the examiner(s) for expeditious evaluation for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.

**(Prof. Sarangadhar Baral)
Supervisor**

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The literature that sprang out in the State of Tripura has some unique characteristics. In this small state a variety of languages have developed, however, the Bengali, Manipuri and Kokborok literature are three major literatures that “have been continuing with age-old literary traditions; but till recently, the three literary streams had not mingled together” (Chaudhuri 18). A large number of writers in Tripura are bilinguals or multi-linguals; and the recent few decades saw the appearance of numerous translation works in the state. The Kokborok writings, in a written form, however, is comparatively new and the organised writings in Kokborok is believed to be dated around 1945. However what is lacked in the written literature is compensated by their rich oral tradition (19). Their folk tales and folk songs contain a vivid depiction of the past life and lived experiences of the Borok people.

The present research is an attempt to study the selected folktales of the Boroks and the poems of contemporary Borok poets such as – Shefali Debbarma, Sudhanya Tripura, Chandrakanta Murasingh, Nandakumar Debbarma, as well as short story writers such as - Debabrata Deb, Bimal Singha and Haripada Debbarma. The selected folktales in this study will throw light on the Borok ethos and identity. But, the contemporary Kokborok literary texts [as represented by the selected texts] express certain socio-cultural experiences which do not corroborate the settled and contented life of the early Boroks. However, the Boroks’ love for their land and culture still remains as a continuous tradition. So, the study will attempt to examine the problems afflicting the Boroks in terms of their oral and literary expressions which may be

regarded as their little narratives emerging from the below and telling their tales as yet marginalised and mostly unheard. These little narratives thus have been taken as a counter-narrative to other narratives stereotyping the Borok identity, culture and history.

Being a minority in their own homeland as a result of an unending migration of refugees in the state, and the gradual assimilation of their culture and tradition by the Bengali culture; living amidst the unrest situation and ethnic violence, the emerging writers who use their own native language Kokborok, depict in their writings the contemporary situations and present their own views and thoughts while presenting their rich cultural values and experiences. They depict in their stories and poems the continuous sufferings of the people amidst the socio-economic and political problems, their experiences of violence perpetrated by various militant outfits and also that of the government counter-insurgency operations. The theme of rootedness and their sense of awareness of the cultural loss resulted by their contact with other cultures, their attempts to recover their cultural heritage and identity by frequently referring to their myths and folklore, and their attempt to retrieve their rich oral tradition remain the dominant theme in their writings. Through their writings, the Borok writers attempt to make conscious efforts to retrieve their rich oral culture which reflects the economic and social life of the people. The selected folktales, folk songs, short stories and poems in this study reflect the life and experiences of the region's people which may be regarded as their little narratives emerging from the below and telling their tales as yet marginalised and mostly unheard.

Postmodernists today pay great importance to the little narratives that appear in the form of poetry, fiction, folktales, folk songs and so on. Jean-Francois Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by provoking skepticism about universalising theories which he terms 'grand narratives' and other source of authoritarianism, argues against the possibility of

justifying the narratives that bring together disciplines and social practices, such as science and culture; “the narratives we tell to justify a single set of laws and stakes are inherently unjust” (qtd. in Williams 211). Lyotard also argues that little narratives have become an appropriate way to explain and define social problems, social transformation and history of the people. Hence the selection of creative writings are taken as a counter-narrative or ‘little narratives’ (a term coined by Lyotard) in this study. Creative writings, such as the ones selected in this study often portray the ethos, sentiments and ethnicity of certain tribes, that is often absent in non-creative writings, in this case the Borok tribe, which is otherwise referred to as rootedness. In this connection, Homi K. Bhabha, too, postulates that world literature should be studied in terms of the historical trauma people have suffered – ‘a focus on. . . the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical past’ (12).

The state of Tripura is situated in the northeastern part of India; it is bordered by Bangladesh to the north, south and west, and the Indian states – Assam and Mizoram to the east. It is inhabited by 36.74 lakhs people (according to 2011 census), constituting 0.3 per cent of the country’s population, of which the Bengali people form the ethno-linguistic majority in Tripura. Around thirty percent of the population belongs to the indigenous communities, known in India as scheduled tribes. The territory as it stands now situates between 22.56, and 22.32, North longitude and between 91.10, & 92.20, East longitude with an area of 10491 Sq. Km. (length 183.5 Km. widths 112.7 Km.). Approximately sixty per cent of the total area consists of hilly land while the remaining forty per cent constitute flat land. This ancient land of flourishing forest intersected by six principal hill ranges and buttressed by a number of rivers and streams, with extensive variety of flora and fauna enchanted the travelers since time immemorial.

The original inhabitants of the land are known today as the Tripuris (geographically), the Twipras or the Boroks (racially). The Kokborok speaking community compriseses of eight maintribes, namely – Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Murasing, Koloi, Rupini and Uchoi. As these tribal communities use a common language called ‘Kokborok’ which is why, they are commonly known today as the ‘Boroks’ (Hoque 1). For information, the Kokborok language belongs to Bodo-Garo group of Tibeto- Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan family. The term ‘Kokborok’ is in fact a compound of two main words viz. ‘Kok’ (language) and ‘Borok’ (human). So the combination of these words means ‘language of human being’. However, the second word is used to denote the Borok people. The Boroks are with an approximate population of fifteen lakhs settled mainly in the state of Tripura and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. They are also found in some of the North-Eastern state of India, Myanmar and Nepal (Hogue 1).

For several centuries, the today modern Tripura has been ruled by the Tripura dynasty, which existed as an independent princely state under the colony of the British Empire. During the Birtish era, Tripura was known as Hill Tippera, while the area annexed and ruled directly by British India was known as Tippera District (present Comilla District).The independent Tripura Kingdom (or Hill Tippera) joined the newly independent India in 15 October, 1949. Since the integration of Tripura to the Indian Union, there emerged numerous tensions and scattered violence in the state which are primarily led by ethnic strife between the indigenous Borok tribe and the migrant Bengali population.

The boundaries of Tripura kingdom changed over time; the ancient kingdom of Tripura “at various times extended its rule from the Sunderbans in the west to Burma in the east, and northwards as far as Kamrup (a kingdom in Assam)” (Hunter 118). The region of Tripura was ruled by the Tripuri kings for many centuries; however, the date of its beginning (the kingdom) is

not documented. The *Rajmala* (literally meaning the ‘Garland of Kings’) or ‘Chronicles of Tripura’ which was first written during the fifteenth century provides a chronicle of 179 kings from antiquity up to Krishna Kishore Manikya (1830-1850). The *Rajmala* is therefore believed to be the oldest book dealing with the history of ancient Tripura. The book was written in a verse form in Bengali, and was “in a detached form, but was collected and written in sequence by the Brahmin officials of Rajah Dharma Manikya, the 102nd Rajah” during the fifteenth century A.D. (Sandys 8). The Brahmin officials – Baneswer and Sukreswer were royal courtiers, and were patronised by the Rajah (king). The book gives the kings of Tripura the status of ‘Kshatriyas’ and claims them to be descendents of Druhyu, son of Yayati, of the Lunar Race. It also depicts the forefathers of the Boroks as firm worshippers of the Hindu god, Siva (god of destruction). This becomes debatable and a matter of great interest to scholars and academicians. Manik Lal Reang in an introduction to the reprinted James Long’s book, *Analysis of the Rajmala or Chronicles of Tripura* articulates that, “some scholars questioned regarding the authenticity of this book and some others opined that no description of the life and condition of general common people of the state could be found in it” (v). Based on the records given by the *Rajmala* many books have been written dealing with the history of Tripura.

According to the *Rajmala*, the ancient Tripura was situated in the Kirat, a land ruled by Druhyu of the Lunar or Indo-Scythian race, the brother of Puru, who was banished by his father Yayati (Yajati) from Pratishthanpur in the eastern provinces. Druhyu then constructed a city in the Tribeg region. According to N. C. Nath, who translated the original Bengali verses, Tripura was named after the son of Daitya (a descendant of Druhyu), Tripur (Tripura):

King Daitya, a descendant of Druhyu, was living in the Kirata city for many thousand years as if he was immortal years. After long years a son was born to him. The king

named his son Tripura, because he was born in the Trivega [also called Tribeg] country.
(14)

According to the *Rajmala*, Tripur was not a religious man and never practiced any rituals and as a result he became very cruel:

He did not study the *Vedas, Agamas and Puranas*. He had no education at all. He did not receive any initiation (*diksu*) from a preceptor (guru). He did not care to know anything about God or guru. Neither did he learn any good conduct. He had the nature and behavior of a *Kirata*. He never kept good company with good men. (14)

Tripur became a tyrant and even oppressed the worshippers of Shiva. With the grace of Lord Shiva, a son named Trilochandra was born to king Tripur's widow. Shiva desired that Trilochandra would become a great king and adhere to the worship of the fourteen gods – the Sun, Moon, Himalaya, Kamdeva, Fire, Ganges, Water, Prabha, Ganesha, Kartika, Brahma, Sarasvati, Siva and Vishnu. Trilochandra, thus, became a great ruler and since his rule, “these fourteen gods become the family deities of the royal family of Tripura and even to-day, the Chaturdas Devata is worshipped at Old Agartala, the former capital of Tripura” (Reang vi). This is how the *Rajmala* depicts the history of the royal family and their association with the Hindu faith. In the *Rajmala* we also found that after marrying the daughter of the Hedamba king, Trilochandra conquered various lands; he even visited the Yudhistir of Mahabharata. Twelve sons were born in the house of Trilochandra and they are known as the twelve Tripura families. However, one of Trilochandra's sons, Daksina occupied the throne after his father deceased. Jajarpha, the 74th king invaded Rangamati (renamed Udaipur after Uda Manikya) which was located on the banks of the river Gomati in South Tripura in the fourteenth century. After the king of Rangamati was defeated, Rangamati was made the capital of

Tripura. In the book we also see that Ratnafah, the witty king and son of Khyasangfah, the 98th king of Tripura, with the aid of Mohammadan troops had conquered the Gaur Kingdom and shortly after he obtained four thousand troops and the title of ‘Manikya’ which the kings of Tripura have retained ever since. Apart from this, the book contains a large number of cantos about the life, affairs and rule of different Tripura Rajas. Till today, the *Rajmala* of the Tripura family which bears all the marks of antiquity is understood to be a genuine record of the Tripura royal family. However, there are scholars and authors who challenged the validity of the book being a complete history of ancient Tripura. There are scholars like James Long who pointed out the omission of the Buddhist community in the book though Bhuddism “was at one period the predominant religion on Bengal and extended its sway from the Indian Ocean to the frontiers of China” (31). This, however, may be because of the chronicles being composed by the Hindu Brahmans patronised by the Tripura rulers “who may have adopted in them their usual policy of taking little notice of their religious opponents, passing over their history in contemptuous silence” (31). The *Rajmala* while presenting in extensive details, records of the royal life and their affairs with foreign territories, it omitted the life and experiences of the common Borok people. In other words, it can be said that no single page in the book focused on the ancient history of the rural Borok life. Thus, tracing back these unrecorded history and experiences requires a comprehensive analysis of their oral traditions including their folktales, folk songs and other creative arts which will shed light on the past experiences and cultural life of the common Borok people. It is these stories and songs that encompass the psyche and cultural ethos of the Borok people.

E. F. Sandys in his book, *History of Tripura* has narrated/divided the history of Tripura into three major periods namely – the Hindu Period that includes the records given by the *Rajmala*, the Mohamadan Period and the English Period. The Mohamadan Period includes the invasion of

Tripura Kingdom by the Muhammadans which occurred since the thirteenth century. During the thirteenth century onward, there came several Muslim invasions of the region:

The state was first overrun by the Muhammadans under Tughril in 1279, and was again invaded by Ilyas Shah in the middle of the fourteenth century, and by Nawab Fateh Jang in 1620. The plains portion. . . was not, however, annexed by the Mughal empire until 1733. (Hunter 118)

Although their rule never penetrated the hill regions; and as a result the traditional culture and life style of the indigenous people have been left intact and preserved in the rural areas. The Tripura Kingdom was never assessed to revenue and they always remained outside the sphere of the Muhammadan administration. However, the Mughals had influence over the appointment of the Tripuri kings (118).

In past centuries, Tripura Kingdom was at constant war and conflict with her neighbouring kingdoms and states. In the early fifteenth century (until 1515 A. D.) three successive Tripura kings settled thousands of Bengali-Hindu families in their kingdom. This particular era in the history also saw royal patronage for Bengali literature in Tripura. Hindu Brahmins settled in different parts of the state and the majority of the population embraced Hinduism, built temples and adopted Vaishnavism in 1470. Till today, the indigenous belief and practices are a synthesis of “indigenous animism and the ritualism of Bengali Hindus” (Debbarma 29).

During the British rule in India, Tripura became a princely state and the kings of Tripura had an estate in British India, popularly known as Tiperra District or Chakla Roshnabad (now the Comilla district of Bangladesh). The East India Company started collecting revenues from the Tripura plains and, thus, this created revolt among the indigenous tribes of Tripura on the issue of

revenue collection. During the second half of the eighteenth century, the Tripura King's property was shrinking as the East India Company's demands for tax increased. Along with these came the British criminal and civil procedure code, which was deeply alien to the indigenous culture (Choudary 26).

The penultimate phase of the nineteenth century saw the enactment of the Tenancy Act in 1885-86, where the British gave their Bengali subjects tenancy rights at a very low cost to attract cultivation and boost revenue. A total of 30,000 hectares of additional plain land was settled (Chakraborty 36). Thus, the pressure on the land continued; and was further aggravated by the King's liberal donation of land to high caste Brahmins, Muslims and government officials. The banning of *jhum* (shifting cultivation) in the forest areas in 1887 and the 'Jhoomia Rehabilitation Scheme' of 1889 attracted more non-tribals than tribals, taking more land away from the tribals (Bhattacharya 67). The various economic measures taken by the King (based on the British model) to increase his revenue, thus, enormously aggravated the problem of land scarcity for the tribals by the end of the nineteenth century. The first half of the twentieth century saw further agitation due to the massive influx of non-tribals into Tripura, which was made possible through a settlement policy of the King. This heavy influx of migrants worsened the ethnic conflict in the State. As a consequence, a growing numbers of ethno-centric tribal parties mushroomed, with the 'Gana Muktiparishad', a Left Wing Tribal Party, in forefront. The failure of the government's efforts to restore the alienated tribal lands also created a sense of mistrust and betrayal among the indigenous community and led to the emergence of pro-tribal parties like the 'Tripura Upajati Juba Samity' (TUJS) in 1967 (Mohanta 60), 'Tripura National Volunteer (TNV)' and many other insurgent groups which later led to the 1980s communal riots between the indigenous tribes and the Bengalis. It can be assumed that the recent cyclic ethnic violence in Tripura is inevitable, if not intractable,

in as much as the ethnic minority is not given the sense of equity in the economic, psychological, social and political space by the majority group.

Emerging in the late twentieth century, the contemporary Kokborok poems and short stories have provided a vivid depiction of the contemporary social, economic, political and cultural life of the Borok people. The selected folktales, contemporary stories and poems represent a wide variety of the Borok culture, their belief systems and socio-political life, the enduring truth of their daily life and the creative imagination of the people. In them we find certain impacts of the Tripura insurgency in the daily life of the common people, their attachment to their land and other natural environment, the old tales and songs that embedded the social, economic and spiritual life of the Borok people. Like most writings from other writers of Northeast India like Robin S Ngangom (Manipur), Kynpham S. Nongkynrih (Shillong) and others, the Borok writers depict in their stories and poems, the theme of insurgency, ethnic violence, identity, nationhood, corruption, memory, the ecology of the region and the simple everyday life of the common people.

This present study focuses on the selected folktales of the Boroks and the poems of contemporary Borok poets such as – Shefali Debbarma, Sudhanya Tripura, Chandrakanta Murasingh, Nandakumar Debbarma, as well as short story writers such as - Debabrata Deb, Bimal Singha and Haripada Debbarma, which aims to represent their identity and culture by presenting the lived experience of the people through their narratives. The selected texts are very fresh which reflect their self-confidence and rootedness in their culture. The writers and poets by creatively referring to their myths and folktales strive to reclaim their past; and through their continuous depiction of certain enduring values lived in their everyday life, they have tried to reclaim identity and further challenge all stereotypes constructed by the mainstream literature of Tripura. The

native writers and poets have brought into view the people's continuous oppression and suffering in socio-political terms.

As Alan Dundes has pointed out, the folklore acts as a mirror of culture, and thus can be regarded as a fair self-expression of the people. Dundes writes:

For folklore is autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people's own description of themselves. This is in contrast to other descriptions of that people, descriptions made by social workers, sociologists, political scientists or anthropologists. It may be that there is distortion in a people's self image as it is expressed in that people's songs, proverbs, and the like, but one must admit that there is often as much, if not more, distortion in the supposedly objective descriptions made by professional social scientists who in fact see the culture under study through the culturally relative and culturally determined categories of their own culture. Moreover, even the distortion in a people's self image can tell the trained observer something about that people's values. (55)

The Borok folk culture and oral tradition which is mainly based on the rural people practicing their rituals, customs and beliefs which are manifested in their tales, dances and songs. Most of their tales have the *jhum* as their background and the life centered around this/their agricultural activities – be that of love, merry making, sadness, death, marriage and so on and so forth – have been discussed in their tales. The folklore of the Borok people, thus, served as a reflection of their cultural ethos and also as a narrative that stands against the metanarrative provided by the book *Rajmala* that has excluded the history and lived experiences of the common Borok people.

This study could underline a fact that, historically the kings of Tripura depended on the common mass only for collecting revenue and ironically left them to fend for themselves. So, over

the years in Tripura, there emerged two streams of literature— one stream is characterised by the accounts of the kings of illustrious pre-historic ‘lunar dynasty’ as presented in the book *Rajmala*, and the other stream developed isolatedly in the folk language of the Boroks which remained predominantly oral. The early Kokborok oral literature further bloomed into stories, songs and proverbs that actually describe the everyday experiences of the people; their socio-economic life, their sufferings and plight, which are treated as little narratives for this study. In their folk songs and folktales, they narrate the coming of new season, the festive seasons, their rituals and practices; and present in its own simple way the origin of certain natural phenomenon and the abstract concept of good and evil.

Emerging recently in the late twentieth century, the contemporary Kokborok poems and short stories have provided a vivid depiction of the contemporary social, economic, political and cultural life of the Borok people. One important theme that may be found in the poems of the Borok writers is the theme of rootedness to their land. The Borok people are deeply attached to their land, hills and rivers, which the poets often celebrated in their poems. For example, in an expressly romantic Kokborok lyric, “A House by the Riverside”, Nandakumar Debbarma has subtly expressed the contrast between human proneness to death and the rivers perennial flow. In this it is subtly implied that the collective sufferings of the people remembered over changing times will work as a new landmark of identity for the next generations. It also means the memory of collective experiences such as – death, murder and trauma of the past and history would historically be usable as marker of identity for the people. In this poem, Nandakumar specifically mentioned several rivers like – Hwangho, Mekong and the Gomatee and depicted these rivers as metaphor of the land inhabited by the Borok people. For him, these rivers and hills have something that holds some secrets of life which he wanted to be passed down to the new generation.

Nandakumar's love for their land and his intimate relationship with nature can clearly be seen in his poems.

Sudhanya Tripura, too, reflects in his poetry the life and experiences of the people – mainly the *jhumias* – in some of his poems like – the “Woo-Wang” where a vivid picture of the jhum field and the stilt-house can be found; the “Mad Pipers” which describes the daily experiences of a mad piper “keeping the fishing net / on the bank” (300) of a river while playing his flute, with a brief and colorful description of the natural surroundings as a background; and the “Displaced Heart” which portrays the life of the rural people and their daily sufferings and experiences.

It is, thus, stereotypical to imagine emerging literature from Tripura as dealing only with the insurgency, trauma and ethnic conflicts. On the other hand, nature and land form a major theme in the contemporary Kokborok poetry as well as shape the Borok myths and folktales. It is often argued that land and identity (even ethnicity) are closely related, and the interrelationship evolves deepening men's solidarity and realisation of meaningful pursuits. We often define ourselves, our identities in terms of the place we dwell in. Ordinarily, land and place is considered as static and fixed entity, but, it can be conceived as mobile, changing and hybrid spatiality which has been critically developed during the recent decades by postmodern thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, Edward W. Soja and others. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre theorises land or space by defining it as encompassing more than material, physical, space, although without eliminating it. Both objective and subjective, it is the space we practically produce and then perceive and experience with our senses (12). Land also acts as a potential generator of knowledge, discourses and experiences and also as a social topography that creates and enacts various cultural assumptions. For this reason, land and nature very often make their appearances in poems and creative writings of the in-dwelling people.

Another recurring theme that may be found in the poems of the contemporary Borok poets is the theme of awareness to the misrepresentation constructed by the mainstream discourse that threatens their ethnic identity and also the present socio-economic factors that led to their marginalisation and sufferings in their daily life. For example, Shefali Debbarma in her poem, “Lamination”, grieves over the Scheduled Tribe card stereotyping the Borok identity. In this poem, Shefali had used significant images of *risa* and *pachhra*, the traditional Borok dresses, against a laminated identity card thrust upon them by the government. This juxtaposition of the Borok traditional dress and the laminated identity card used by the government is highly significant in the sense that both represent a discourse on culture from different perspectives: the *risa* and the *pachhra* represent anything that signifies the culture and tradition of the Boroks, on the other hand, the government paper signifies the mainstream discourse or the fixed identity thrust upon by the government. The outcome of these two things placed together inside the *khuturuk* after a century years is that the *risa* and *pachhra* have worn out and turning into shreds but the laminated S. T. Card remains intact. This exposes how vulnerable people’s culture can be when it has not been appreciated in use by the dominant culture which understands the official representation framed and laminated.

The Borok folk songs and the contemporary poems both share their similarity in depicting the intimate relationship between man and nature. The Borok folktales and folk songs celebrated life and nature whereas the contemporary Borok poets, apart from depicting the attachment of the Borok people to their land and nature, are also focused on the social and political milieu of the present which would attest the continuity of the imaginative and intellectual bond with their land. There are poets like – Chandrakanta Murasingh, who being a witness to the agonies of contemporary Tripura, is continuously seeking the reclamation of the Borok identity by implanting

the rich cultural heritage by depicting the typical Tripura landscape and the natural surroundings into the people's mind through his poetry.

The contemporary Kokborok fictions are very few in number to find, but the texts selected in this study may be taken as a literary sample in measuring contemporary socio-political life of the Boroks. The fourth chapter, "Contextualising Little Narratives of the Boroks", brought to view some selected contemporary stories that may be regarded as a clear reflection of the contemporary social and political milieu. Like several writings from the northeast India, the Borok writers depict in their story the theme of insurgency, ethnic violence, corruption, memory, nationhood, the ecology of the region and the simple life of the common people, and in this case their stories serve as a tool in depicting the lived-experiences of the Borok tribe.

In his short story, "Gangacharan's Chompreng", a Borok writer Debabrata Deb has tried to respond to the present socio-cultural conflicts which affect the life of the Boroks in general. In the story, the *Chompreng* (or sometimes written as *Chongpreng*) – a traditional musical instrument of the Boroks – signifies anything that represents the rich cultural heritage of the people, and also signifies any medium through which a going-back-to-the-old times can be made possible by continuously invoking the muse that inspired their ancestors. This theme of rootedness is one of the most popular themes that can be found in the writings of the Northeastern writers. Instead of being continuously cajoled by his friend Kamdar and his comrades to join the insurgent group, Rabichandra still desires to follow a non-violent path in order to improve his condition. He continuously strives for a peaceful coexistence as symbolised by his continuous seeking for his father's musical instrument, the chompreng. This reveals the dilemma in the minds of the Borok people. The story juxtaposes contrasting characters like Kamdar and Abhiram, who by any means try to preserve their land and identity through violent ways, and Rabichandra who in order to get

back to their root chooses a peaceful path. However, the concluding part of the story reveals that Rabichandra is uncertain of his son, who as the story depicts, is likely to follow a more violent path like Kamdar and his friends. This can be understood not merely in relation to the new generation's leaning towards armed rebellion, but also to the continuous and unending deprivation and marginalisation faced by the Boroks, which seemed a compelling reason for adapting violent means. In the story, "Basan's Grandmother", Bimal Singha artistically conveys his message to the people about the futility of ethnic conflict while vividly portraying the conflicts and clashes between the tribals and non-tribals during the 1980s.

The threat of their cultural identity and the sufferings of the innocent citizens during the conflict situation are also vividly depicted in the selected stories. A perfect example for this is the characters portrayed in both "Gangachanran's Chompreng" and "Basan's Grandmother" who have to earn their daily living by working as labourers at the road construction side and running a petty shop. Their daily sufferings and plight, however, are not represented in the mainstream discourse as there always have been a much higher ideological battles focused on the ethnic conflicts that are taking place at time. The creative writings of the region, thus, become the one channel through which the issues of insurgency, the daily experiences and sufferings of the common people are communicated and expressed. For Homi K. Bhabha, the world literature should be studied in terms of the historical trauma people have suffered – 'a focus on. . . the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical past' (12). Fictional narratives thus offer a wide spectrum of representation that is seemingly impossible in a non-fictional narrative.

In the light of postmodern thinkers as cited earlier, these little narratives of the Boroks, thus, stand against all stereotypes constructed on the Boroks and their culture as they clearly reflect the lived-experiences of the people. Fictional narrative allows a large space that cannot be found

in historiography (that emphasises on data, facts, records, etc.) such as the lived experiences of the people, their worldviews, their reaction to certain events and incidents and the trauma they lived with. The selected narratives are not expressly postmodern in nature, but a just understanding of their location and appreciation would fairly establish that history of a people is not the history of the kings and rulers; any comprehensive history would accommodate the oral and unwritten histories of the common people so long set aside from national history by dominant classes.

Therefore, least known Kokborok narratives are taken to analysis here with an intention that their stories are heard and known.

The dissertation proposes to study the related issues by five chapters.

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CHAPTER II:
FOLKTALE AS A REFLECTION OF CULTURE

Chapter II

Folktale as a Reflection of Culture

Folklore has the capacity to preserve certain cultural values and elements and also serve as a good support for societal institutions, norms and practices. According to Kishore Jadav, folklore also acts as a driving force for “holding up to scorn those who depart from socially accepted norms, and eulogizing those who follow them, exemplifying the standard-bearers of values and goals of the community” (28) apart from suggesting rules for conduct. Folklore reveals the creative mind of the people, their ability to interpret and explain certain events, circumstances and the existence of some natural phenomenon. In folkloristic writing, folklorists like Alan Dundes consider folklore as a “mirror of culture” in the sense that the concept is applied to relate historical and cultural information about a group of people, with the presumption that it is a marker of social identity.

Various forms of folklore like – myths, folktales, legends, folksongs, proverbs, riddles, games, dances and many others are, in modern times, instrumental to understanding the behaviour and tradition of a particular group of people. As these stories, tales and performing arts are developing from the people or the folk itself which are passed down from generation to generation in an oral form, they contain certain elements of their image and culture. For Dundes, “folklore is [an] autobiographical ethnography – that is, it is a people’s own description of themselves” (55). He further says that, this description made by the people is “in contrast to other descriptions of that people, descriptions made by social workers, sociologists, political scientists or anthropologists” (55). However, there are some confusion that the folk’s own description, too, has some distortions

which contain false description and depiction. But, what should be admitted here is that, such distortions relating the self's image or description of the folk is much lesser than the supposedly objective and scientific descriptions made by certain sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists who "in fact see the culture under study through the culturally relative and culturally determined categories of their own culture" (55). Dundes further incisively puts:

Analyses of collections of folklore can provide the individual who takes advantage of the opportunities afforded by the study of folklore a way of seeing another culture from the inside out instead of from the outside in, the usual position of a social scientist or teacher. (55)

Apart from serving as a self-description of the folk, folklore being a production of collective creativity serves as a reflection of certain socio-cultural mores and practices. In this case, Jadav wrote:

Folklore serves as a critique of the socio-cultural mores of the sections of society of which it is an ethnopoetic documentation – that is, folklore being a collective creativity of a collective psyche, its essential function is to be self-reflective, to be critically realistic. (28)

An in-depth analysis of the Borok folklore reveals certain elements of their culture and tradition, their worldview and daily life. The folk literature of the Borok holds a significant place in their social and cultural life. Their folklore is very rich, and this richness perhaps owes to their ethnic origin. The Kokborok speaking community which comprises of eight tribal communities, namely – Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Murasing, Koloi, Rupini and Uchoi all have a rich and complex culture, and any traces of the elements of the respective cultures of these communities can be found

in their folk literature. Chandrakanta Murasingh, taking about the predominant themes of the Kokborok folktales, says:

Tripuri folk tales are rich in variety and in artistic presentation. Among the stories one finds themes of moral, of social guidance and restrictions, of ancient legends, fertility, taboos, creation and of fate and destiny. There are stories in the form of beast-fable or of abstract character as well. Almost similar stories are found among the different tribes in Tripura. Sometimes through different tales motif of a particular tale is inlaid in a sub-plot. Some of the folk tales of the Tripuris have their close parallels in folk tales of other countries as well. (282-283)

The oral tradition of Kokborok is very old that it is impossible to trace back its origin. In their tales, we see many animal characters that speak the language of man and behave in a human manner. There are characters such as gatherers, hunters, shifting cultivators, priests, chiefs, kings, the local flora and the adventurers. We also see tales that talk about the origin of certain natural phenomenon and also moral teachings based on certain taboos as hold upon by the people. These are the tales and stories that are handed down from generation to generation. However, today, some expansions, additions and alterations have been made in these tales (Murasingh 283). Most of the Kokborok folktales have the jhum as their background and the life centered on this/their agricultural activities – be that of love, merry making, sadness, death, marriage and so on and so forth – have been discussed in their tales.

In one of their folk songs, “Goria Rwmani” (Onset Jhum) we see a clear picture of the *Garia* Festival celebrated by the Tripuris/Boroks for worshipping their chief deity, Garia. The

Garia festival is celebrated in the opening month of the new year before the traditional jhum cultivation starts:

By January – end, it is like February – March

Even the parrot coos, for sure

By February – end it is like March – April

Myrtle plant flowers no more

Khumake tree blooms in the Forest

And Gharia Festival is at the door

Vaisakha will come after Chaitra has gone. (qtd. in Sutradhar 48)

With the coming of new year, the minds of the Boroks remain highly eager as it is the time for worshipping their chief deity, Garia/Goria. The voice of the *toksuma* (parrot) indicates the arrival of *Falgun* (February-March) season. It is the season of merry making, feasting and dancing. The Garia festival which is observed between the last day of *Chaitra/Chaitor* (March-April) and the seventh day of *Vaisakha/Boisak* (end of April) is very important among the people. This season is then followed by the traditional jhum cultivation in the hill-slopes: cutting down the thick forest, setting fire on it and sowing of paddy seeds in the jhum field:

Between the last day of Chaitra

And seventh day of Vaisakha

Paddy seeds will be sown

Sow Garia paddy in the cold valley

Children find Garia rice very lovely

On the slope facing the East

Sow mami valatok paddy

And unwise decision it may be

To sow the inherited Garo sukia paddy

Because it does not give shoots in plenty. (qtd. in Sutradhar 48)

When the sun rises, groups of men and women walk down the slopes to their jhum field with materials required to sow paddy seeds in their field. They also carry their *langa* (a kind of basket usually carried on the back) in their backs in which they put their mid-day meal, a cooked rice wrapped up in a banana leaf. When they reach their jhum field, they started sowing seeds surrounding the jhum. We also see in the song that the jhumias have utilised their traditional knowledge of sowing. For example, *garia* (or *garu*) seed should be sown in the cold valley and the *mami* seed be sown on the slope facing the east. Likewise, it is unwise to sow paddy seed with *garo* paddy seed as that will give an unfavourable result. A small bamboo hut called a *gairing* has been set up in the field in which they can take their meal, rest for some time and watch the field safe from some animals:

On the hillock a like breast of hen

I shall set up the jhum hut

You are a lady, keep sowing the Paddy

Sow Balsam seeds alongside the Path

Also sow marigold seeds

Along with the Balsam seeds. (qtd. in Sutradhar 48)

The gairing or the jhum hut plays an important role in the Borok life and is like their second home. In one of the Kokborok folktales called “Kok-Ta-Sadi” (Do Not Talk) we also see the jhumia and his wife go to the field for work during the agricultural season. As there are many works left to do in the field, they have to stay at the gairing for many days. Unfortunately, during their absence their two beautiful daughters are taken away by the royal armies to the palace. This tale also portrays the everyday activities of the people during the agricultural season. Usually men and women go to their jhum field during day time, and the children and the old age remain at the house. However when the work is intense, the jhumias usually spent several days at their gairing as going and returning from the jhum field involve a lot of time to waste. This is their daily toil and the daily life style of the people during the agricultural season.

In one of the folk songs called “Jaduni or Sarbang” (Love since Childhood) we see how the adulthood life has been centered mainly on the jhum cultivation:

Since when grass had started to grow long ago

Both of us have been living intimately. . .

We children have grown up playingly (sic)

Now we have attained adulthood

You are an adult and I am too

It behoves us to work for our lively hood. . . [sic] (qtd. in Sutradhar 39)

Here, the narrator says that while childhood life has been very easy, and most of their times have been spent at the house and courtyard – playing some games and roaming around in and near the village. Thereafter, when they attain adulthood they have some responsibilities to take including working at the field and look after their families for their livelihood. As the economic activity of the Boroks is mainly based on shifting cultivation or jhum cultivation, their whole life has been centered on the jhum field and the gairings (bamboo hut). Thus, most of their folktales and folk songs are also centered on the jhum. According to Gupta, the practice of jhum is not, merely exercised by the tribals for their sustenance, but a traditional method of earning a livelihood, a traditional farming system that uses local product and techniques, has rooted in the past, has evolved to their present stage as a result of the interaction of the cultural and environmental condition of the region and is deeply embedded in the tribal psyche (47-50).

The Boroks have celebrated almost every event in their folk songs – songs that express about their happiness in seeing the first crop, about the intimate relationship between young men and young women while working in the field, about the harvesting season and also about their sufferings and loss due to failure of their cultivation. The Boroks who lead a nomadic life have to move from place to place in search of fresh land for jhum cultivation. The old cultivated land does not yield much and this left them no option but to find other hill slopes to continue their cultivation. Jhumming does not always give rich harvest, and sometimes wild animals attack their crops, and

the natural calamities and diseases too become a great impediment to them. As a result, poverty haunts them regularly and they regard this as their own fate. One of the folk songs that reflects this fatalism lints thus:

I came to the city of men

But, alas, where am I to find happiness?

The tool for work is not there at home

The pot of rice is not there on the loft of the hut

There isn't any respite even on rainy days

In the scorching heat of the mid-day sun

There is only work and sweat

On the whole of my forehead is written only sorrow

I am turned an owner of grief alone. (qtd. in Murasingh 281)

The above lines clearly reveal how poverty haunts the Borok people at their hill home, and also in the city, where they were left homeless and alienated. It can as well be apprehended that poverty throughout stalked everyman's footsteps that produces fatalistic belief among the people.

Over the years, two segments of culture can be found in Tripura – one being a culture nurtured in the royal palace and the other being a cultural heritage developed and grown in the rural area promoted and maintained by the dwellers of hilly areas in Tripura (Sutradhar 19). The culture that is nurtured in the royal palace is one that has found its fame in the whole Indian sub-

continent. The Indian classical music was played and performed by those artists in the royal palace; and gradually this culture influenced the whole members of the royal family and later spread in the city life:

Earlier this environment (cultural) was not spread in city life and it was limited to the members of the King Family and Thakur family only. When the idea for multidisciplinary cultural environment entered, it expanded to the city life and suburb area. Though the culture was limited to the city life gradually it came into the village life ultimately. (Sutradhar 20)

However, the culture practiced in the rural areas is simple and less tinged by the mainland Indian culture. The folk culture and the oral culture nurtured and developed there have close connection with their style of living. The folk culture which is mainly based on the rural people practicing their rituals, customs and beliefs manifested in their tales, dances and songs mainly focused on their social life. However, the *Rajmala*, (believed to be the only recorded history of Tripura providing facts and evidences on the Tripura royal bloodline) which was composed by the Bengali scholars under the patronage of the Tripura king, speaks little about the life and culture of these common people dwelling in the rural areas. On the other hand, the oral tradition which remained unrepresented and neglected in the mainstream discourse, may also be regarded as an important document for social history as it gives certain insights and understandings to the tradition and customs of the people, their belief systems, the taboos and totems of the people.

The Kokborok folktales as selected in this study also depict life at the royal palace; however these are depicted mainly from the perspective and narrative of the common folk. For example, in

one folk tale called “The Royal Swan” we see how the royal swan has been stolen from the royal’s pond by a poor widow’s son. In the tale we also see that the poor widow’s son had been arrested by the royal soldiers for his crime and this made the poor widow very sad. Though, with the help of the goddess, *Chha Kol Ok*, the young man was released by the king. The folk tale entitled “Kanchanmala” depicts a tragic love relationship between Kanchanmala and her husband who has been forced to join the royal army during a battle between the Tripura king and the Moghal forces. In the tale, we also see that Kanchanmala’s brother-in-law, who served in the royal force was attracted to Kanchanmala’s beauty, sent the royal army to arrest her brother and force him into the battle field. In most of the Kokborok tales as selected in this study reveal the royal palace as something which is very superior to the common folk and the culture and lifestyle as practiced in the respective regions seem very different.

Similar with the tales in some countries, the primary aim of the Borok folktales is to give enjoyment and pleasure to the hearers especially to children. According to Gan-Chaudhuri, one of the main instruments that constitute the Borok folktales is social control (480). Like many tales in different countries, the Borok folktales encourage reward and punishment; and their social control is expressed in their tales:

How jealousy, cruelty, greediness and selfishness are invariably punished by some mysterious ways is shown through folk-tales; how love and affection, service and sacrifice, courage and wit are rewarded is also exemplified. (Gan-Chaudhuri 480)

In the folktale “The Two Girls”, we see a jhumia who has two wives and three children. His daughter by the elder wife is named Chhipingtwi, and one male child named Aguroy and one

female child named Mairungtwi are born to the younger wife. With the death of Chhipingtwi's mother, Chhipingtwi is looked after by her step-mother. Chhipingtwi is a meek and good hearted girl and very good in domestic work. However Mairungtwi is always jealous of her step-sister. The step-mother ill-treated Chhipingtwi in many ways and never wanted her to be ahead of her daughter. One day the king came to know of the good nature and beauty of Chhipingtwi, and met her and took her to the palace and married her. The happy life of Chhipingtwi made Mairungtwi and her mother jealous of her. They deceived her and asked to visit their house; and while staying in the house they tortured her by pouring boiling water on her. Mairungtwi then wore the dress of her sister and pretended as if she were the queen. However, in the folk tale, when the king knows all the story he kills Mairungtwi and her mother. The story, thus, conveys a moral lesson which anyone can learn: person with good nature and a kind heart will always find many good things in his or her life; and the punishment for the wicked person is death. It also conveys the message that how hard the obstacles, the righteous and good person will always triumph in the end.

In another folktale called "The Lazy Priest (Denga-Ochai)" we see how reckless and lazy person who disobeys his mother's advice is punished by nature. A lazy young man named Abhiram is instructed by his widow mother to recite the hymns of gods and goddesses before setting the jhum field to fire. She also tells him to pray so that he shall not be cursed if young ones of any species are burnt in the process of burning. However, Abhiram pays no heed to his mother's advice. He sets fire to the dried *ghilla*, creeper without praying and reciting the hymns. As a result the king of snakes, *Nagraj*, learns that his children have been burnt and killed. And to take revenge he immediately goes to Abhiram's house and tries to attack his mother. However, realising his mistake and taking the advice of his mother, Abhiram immediately runs to the forest and seeks the

help of “Bura Devata”, the old spirit. The old spirit then asks Abhiram to perform some rituals. And after doing this the body of the snake has been cut into seven pieces. Like “The Two Girls” tale, this tale, too, conveys a moral lesson to the hearers. First, one always has to obey the advice given by his or her mother or father; second, religious rituals must be taken seriously. Thus, folklore is a wisdom book which enshrines experiences of ages that the older generations transmit in telling stories or singing songs. It serves as a support of societal institution, cultural practices and norms. To quote Jadav again, folktale acts as a driving force for “holding up to scorn those who depart from socially accepted norms, and eulogizing those who follow them, exemplifying the standard-bearers of values and goals of the community” (28) apart from suggesting rules for conduct.

As mentioned earlier, the culture and spiritual life of the common Borok people (especially those who live in the rural area) are not mentioned in the ancient chronicle of Tripura, the *Rajmala*, being regularly cited as authentic history by historians. In this aspect, the Borok folk literature appears as a counter-culture voice of its people. For this reason, the folktales and folk songs play an important role in understanding their philosophy of life, their way of living and their culture. According to Bhowmik, the tribal people of Tripura may be “divided into two groups (a) Urban and Semi-urban living in towns and villages in vicinity of towns (b) those living in distant interior areas of hills” (102). These two groups of people hold different values and ideas in their daily life. Bhowmik further postulates:

The urban and semi-urban tribals live side by side with the Bengalee society and the Bengalee thoughts and way of life greatly influenced them, so that they are Bengalee than tribal in their metaphysical and spiritual thoughts. The situation is just reverse in the

interior areas. Of course, there are rare exceptions everywhere. For example, among other things, as regards to conception of Gods and other spirits, the tribal have two distinct views – (i) Their own original conceptions and (ii) The Bengali way of thought. In their own original thoughts, the Gods and spirits have no or very little anthropomorphic traits. Therefore they do not assume a human form for the divine beings and spirits . . . In the urban and semi-urban group of tribals who are in close contact with the Bengalee Population . . . admit deities with human features as the Bengalees do. (102-103)

Thus, the above argument enlightens us of the presence of hybridised identity among the urban and semi-urban people who are closely in contact with the Bengalis. The traditional belief system is merged with that of the Hindu belief system instead of totally rejecting the traditional tribal concepts. This Hinduisation process, as discussed earlier, started with the Borok rulers' close contact with the Bengali culture. This, as a result, requires an in-depth analysis of their folktales, folk songs and creative writings to truly understand the traditional way of life, their value system and social psychology of the Borok people.

Certain characteristics of the Borok indigenous belief system that are highly analogous to the animistic belief can be found in their tales. As such, most of their tales have animal characters that speak the language of man and also behave in a human manner. The word 'animism' is derived from a Latin word *anima* which means life or soul. Animism, thus, can broadly be defined as a belief that even air, rivers, hills, earth, rain, animals, plants, birds and other natural entities have life and soul; and human beings are able to communicate with these natural objects. In the Kokborok folktales we see no difference in the existence of man and animals, flora and fauna and other natural entities. For example, in the tale called "Jhum Cultivation of Four Friends" we see

four characters – a tiger, a pig, a fox and a hen conducting a jhum cultivation, which is believed to be a business of human being. These four friends, like human being, follow all the process of jhum cultivation like selection of suitable location for doing jhumming, setting fire on the field and so on and so forth. In the tale we also see a division of labour among the friends: one will remain at home to cook for those who are working on the field. In one folktale called “A Justice in the Jungle” we also see characters like wild pig, tiger, monkey, hen and bat that speak human language and even communicate with humans.

Dwinjendra Lal Bhowmik in his book, *Tribal Religion of Tripura: A Socio-Religious Analysis* termed the indigenous religion of Tripura as ‘Tribalism’ and opines that traditional religion of Tripura is characterised by Animism or Spiritism. He also says that Totemism is often noted among the Reangs (19-20):

Some of their (Reang) old men say that their race has descended from famous Puranic bird, ‘Gaguda’. The bird is therefore respected. The tribal name ‘Riāng’ is also supposed to be derived from the word ‘Vihariga’. Further, some of the Riāng clans are named after beasts, fish and other objects, such as tiger, leopard, tortoise, wheel etc. (21)

Among the major Borok tribe, the Tripuris, a large number of deities are found. And the structures of the deities are made with bamboo poles or stones. These deities are named in the tribal tongue; and unlike the Hindu deities, no specific temple is used for worshipping their deities. However, with the great influence of the Bengali and Hindu culture among the people starting from the royal court, this traditional indigenous belief system gradually falls apart. There is a mixture between the traditional religion and the Hindu religion, and obviously this mixture is

strengthened by the narrative produced by the *Rajmala*. This narrative that planted a strong Hindu culture in the ancient history of the Boroks subverted the traditional indigenous culture and their little narratives have been subdued and denied for a long time. However, conscious attempts have been made by the contemporary Borok writers like Shefali Debbarma, Sudhanya Tripura, Chandrakanta Murasingh, Nandakumar Debbarma, Debabrata Deb and others, who in their stories and poems, project their consciousness and desire to retain their identity.

While the Kokborok folktales have depicted the impoverished life of the common people, their experiences during the successive kings' regime, their belief systems and economic activities that shaped their daily life; the contemporary Kokborok stories as selected in this study mainly focused on the troubled atmosphere surrounding the Borok people and their indigenous identity threatened by the emergence of other alien culture and discourses. In their stories and verses, the contemporary Borok writers give significant references to their old tales and old songs, a narrative that can somehow be claimed as an authentic description of their self-identity. In their stories, they also depict their plight and struggles under the tension created by communal disharmony and the slaughtering of their identity under the government administration.

In the short story, "The Queen-Swap Magic", Haripada Debbarma artistically juxtaposed the unknown urban man with the simple tribal people, who are in many ways different in their belief and worldview. In the story, we see an unknown narrator, believed to be an urban and modernised man, visiting one rural area. And we also know that the narrator had already visited this village five years ago. For the unknown narrator, everything that he sees in that village is strange and uncivilised. For example, two couples bathing together at the river banks, which, in towns will be regarded as "rudeness, a taboo, to look even at an elderly lady bathing" (Debbarma

278). At one point he was offered rice beer by the villagers but he refused and said that he did not drink. The villagers were astonished and found this very strange and told him that, “a man who did not drink was something strange to them” (279). It is obvious that what the author tries to project in this short story is the difference in the life style, practice and tradition between the modern people and the common rural people. As mentioned earlier, there has been a great difference between the culture that is practiced in the urban/semi-urban and the rural areas of Tripura. It is in the rural areas and among the low-profile common people that the traditional indigenous culture can be found in its untainted form. For this reason, most contemporary Borok stories are featured with characters of the common people and the rural landscape. One instance of such is Debabrata Deb’s short story “Gangacharan Chompreng”, where we see a common man Rabichandra who struggles for his daily living in the midst of ethnic clashes and conflict between the hill and plain peoples. The story is significant in the sense that it vividly presents the constant presence of dilemma in the minds of the tribal people – whether to follow a violent path or the non-violent path – in order to express themselves and preserve their cultural identity during the insurgency period. In the story, we see two sets of people who cling to a different set of ideology. On the one side, we see Kamdar and his comrades who took arms and followed a violent path, and on the other, we see Rabichandra who by any means tries to follow the non-violent path to preserve his identity. Rabichandra’s only desire is to find his father’s musical instrument, the ‘chompreng’ (also written as ‘chongpreng’). It is by playing this instrument under the moonlit night that he wanted to revisit the past experiences of their forefathers and relish into the deep musical note that will, once again, reconnect him to their past tradition.

With all his might, Rabichandra tries to persuade his family to grasp on to his ideology, however at the end of the story we are reminded that he is not certain of his son Sindhukumar, who as the story depicts, is likely to follow a more violent path like Kamdar and his friends:

Rabichandra went into the room with a rush. He needed the chompreng today; at this very moment. If he could not get it right now he was likely to lose Sindhukumar for good. It was the naked truth that faced him now. (Deb 134)

The story also gives a vivid picture of the lived experiences of the tribals, who toil their living through getting every little penny to feed their hungry mouths. The protagonist Rabichandra as well struggles for his daily salary by running a small shop five miles away from his home in order to feed his family. As it is now impossible to practice jhum cultivation due to lack of land he has to find another source of income:

Rabichandra had thought it over and over again. Jhum cultivation was real costly these days. He had no ploughing bulls for the little land he had prepared on the hill slopes. No loan would be provided by the banks for such a small plot of land. His attempt to grow paddy by borrowing/hiring bulls yielded no results. It had all been fruitless labour. (Deb 125-126)

This is also a case to the characters portrayed in Bimal's "Basan's Grandmother". In the story, "Basan's Grandmother" we see Basan's father working as labourer on the Assam-Agartala border road to earn his daily wage. Cultivating crops in a jhum field is now unimaginable for them as cultivating in the same jhum field for years does not yield much for them. The unavailability of land for practicing jhum cultivation creates a great problem to them. This is an expression of the

sufferings and daily experiences of the Boroks who have to toil for their daily living. With the increase rate of immigration from their neighbouring states, they become a small minority group in their own land, and the government administration that allocated some of their reserved lands to the Bengali refugees, thus, become a primary cause of their plight and suffering. The switch from jhum cultivation to settled cultivation becomes a matter of great difficulty as they do not have the skills and money required to get a good harvest (Ghosh 232-233). The reality of their experiences, thus, becomes discernible in their Kokborok stories and poems which reflected not only their plight and suffering but also the cultural dilemma and their creative imagination.

Thus, folktales are such works of art that are not a chronicle of facts; and are stories that are placed in a timeless setting. They are stories that evolved through time and emerged from the common people; it is a medium through which the folks expressed their desires and creative thinking. As a result, “these tales may guide us to the remote unknown past of these people (the Boroks)” and are also “documents of the rich imaginations and intrinsic artistic skill of these ancient people even in that far-off age” (Murasingh 283). To quote Alan Dundes again:

For folklore is autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people’s own description of themselves. This is in contrast to other descriptions of that people, descriptions made by social workers, sociologists, political scientists or anthropologists. It may be that there is distortion in a people’s self image as it is expressed in that people’s songs, proverbs, and the like, but one must admit that there is often as much, if not more, distortion in the supposedly objective descriptions made by professional social scientists who in fact see the culture under study through the culturally relative and culturally determined

categories of their own culture. Moreover, even the distortion in a people's self image can tell the trained observer something about that people's values. (55)

Dundes' description of folklore has affinities with the new historicists' opinion about the grand narrative and its legitimate power to subdue the local narratives of the marginalised groups of people. In his genealogies Michel Foucault "seeks to expose the way power was at work in the seemingly 'objective' vocabularies and diagnostic terms developed by the various branches of the budding human sciences" (qtd. in Bertens 148). For Foucault, these modern sciences that include medicine, criminology, psychiatry and (human) biology are deeply repressive:

They have created general norms and standards that fail to recognize and to do justice to the differences between the characters and experiences of individuals and groups of individuals and between the places where they happen to live. They impose definitions upon us that we might want to reject. The new human sciences have turned out to be straightjackets that, strangely enough, we would seem glad to put on. (qtd. in Bertens 148)

In this Foucauldian context, power works through discourses, like Althusser's ideological state apparatus and his concept of 'interpellation' and Gramsci's 'hegemony', and they operate by consent that they themselves have manufactured. The grand narrative that derives its power through legitimation and rules by consent, for the new historicists, can be countered using little narratives that emerged in the form of folktales, folk songs, stories and other form of narratives.

Over the years in Tripura, there emerged two streams of literature— one stream is characterised by the accounts of the kings of illustrious pre-historic 'lunar dynasty' as presented

in the book *Rajmala*, and the other stream developed isolatedly in the folk language of the Boroks which remained predominantly oral. The early Kokborok oral literature further bloomed into stories, songs and proverbs that actually describe the everyday experiences of the people; their socio-economic life, their sufferings and plight, which are treated as their little narrative in this study. In their folk songs and folktales, they narrate the coming of new season, the festive seasons, their rituals and practices; and present in its own simple way the origin of certain natural phenomenon and the abstract concept of good and evil. According to Dundes, the equation of folklore with ignorance and uneducated should be rejected as they are a significant materials for understanding their identity and self-expression (55-56). However, the narratives of the *Rajmala* do not encompass the daily lived experiences of the common people, thus, leaving out the entire segment of the ethos and sentiments of the common people. The little narratives, on the other hand, throw light on these aspects of the common people and their socio-economic condition that have been left out by the *Rajmala*.

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CHAPTER III:
LAND AS A MARKER OF IDENTITY

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Land as a Marker of Identity

In this chapter, the study will focus on examining contemporary poetry written by the Borok poets and attempt to assess their view of the land that is Tripura.

For many years, our understanding of the concept of land and identity, expressed as territoriality, has been located in the nation and state. It has always been a burning topic in the disciplines of International Relations, International Politics, History, Sociology, Conflict Studies and so on and so forth. The nineteenth and twentieth century witnessed certain kinds of armed rebellion between countries and states (or empires), countries and territories demanding for their separate homeland or reclaiming their land or territory and also some minority groups struggling for their own independence. The main objectives of such struggles were the preservation of their homeland, domination of others' land(s) or the creation of their own homeland so as to build and stimulate their own identity. In this regard, Hall has rightly put:

Our sense of place is really part of our cultural systems of meaning. We usually think about or imagine cultures as “placed” – landscaped, even if only in the mind. This helps to give shape and to give foundation to our identities. However, the way in which culture, place and identity are imagined and conceptualized are increasingly untenable in the light of the historical and contemporary evidence.

(186)

The word 'land' generally suggests the tangible and physical entity; however, the term goes much further than this, connecting to emotions, discourses, imaginations, nationalism and identity. A single entity of land is made up of certain knowledges, experiences and meanings that "take it beyond itself to connect with a host of other discourses around landscape, place, dwelling, as well as region, nation and territory" (Berberich et al 19). The word 'land' is inevitably bound up with the word 'landscape'. Landscape is commonly regarded as a man-made space, a construct and an artificial one. J. B. Jackson, a cultural geographer opines that:

[Landscape] is really no more than a collection, a system of man-made spaces on the surface of the earth. Whatever its shape or size it is never simply a natural space, a feature of the natural environment; it is always artificial, always synthetic, always subject to sudden and unpredictable change. We create them and need them because every landscape is the place where we establish our own human organization of space and time. (156)

Landscape, thus, is generative which allows for the production and creation of new ideologies, knowledges, discourses and practices. Landscape as a tangible or imaginative entity, both, allow for the creation of intimate relationship (psychological or physical) between the inhabitants and their surroundings. In this connection, Mike Crang claims that "Landscape are not individual property; they reflect a society's – a culture's – beliefs, practices and technologies" (15).

The close relationship between land and identity (or ethnic identity) cannot be overlooked as both have always been very subjective and incomplete in the process of their formation. We often define ourselves, our identities in terms of the place we dwell in. Ordinarily, land and place is considered as static and fixed entity, but, it can be conceived as mobile, changing and hybrid spatiality which has been critically developed during the recent decades by postmodern thinkers

like Henri Lefebvre, Edward W. Soja and others. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre theorises land or space by defining it as encompassing more than material, physical, space, although without eliminating it. Both objective and subjective, it is the space we practically produce and then perceive and experience with our senses (12). Land also acts as a potential generator of knowledge, discourses and experiences and also as a social topography that creates and enacts various cultural assumptions.

In this sense, “landscape is the visible and invisible meeting ground of culture, place and space – where identities are exchanged, performed and constructed. Too often, as we have seen, land and identity have been twinned together as ironclad testaments to ethnic solidarity and nationalist territorialism with horrifying consequences (Berberich et al 21).

For this reason, land and Nature (the homeland often depicted simply through its natural surroundings) very often made their appearances in poems and other creative writings of the indwelling people. For example, the Palestinian poet and author, Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry of resistance is filled with the themes of his search for identity and the poet’s sense of the loss of land. His poetry is populated with a continuous but unique cry for the loss of Palestinian identity and land. His poems such as “Identity Card”, “the Passport”, “To My Mother”, “To My Father”, “A Lover from Palestine” and “On Perseverance” are highly praised in Arabic poetry because they embody emblems of the interconnectedness between identity and land. Darwish also used ‘Palestine’ as a metaphor for the loss of Eden, birth and resurrection, and the anguish of dispossession and exile. Likewise, place and natural surroundings have always played an important part in the formation of ethnic identity among the indigenous peoples of Tripura. Their oral tradition and the contemporary fictions and poems reveal their love for the land, their intimate

relationship with the landscape and typical hills and forests which act as a source for their rootedness to the past.

The literature that sprang out from the northeastern region of India is often labelled as the literature of conflict. This is primarily due to this region's long engagement with ethnic conflicts, insurgent movements and so on, during the last few decades (and still continue in some areas), which find its place in most pages of their writings. However, Rini Barman has rightly pointed out in her article, "The Mythopoeic in Contemporary Northeast Indian Poetry" that writings of the northeast Indian cannot be exclusively termed as 'literature of conflict' since the writers from northeast India talk about many other issues apart from violence and conflict:

That literature from the Northeast is conflict literature is a huge myth because these poets writing in English share the romanticism and mytho-poetic vision of their vernacular counterparts both past and present. The common bond of poetic sensibility is predominated by love for the land, nature, myths, narrative tribal folklore. The universal coherence of these poets gets reflected in their love for the land and the love of humanity which coalesce into surreal images. (Barman)

Explaining why the mainstream discourse has labelled the literature produced in this region of the country as literature of conflict, Rini further observes:

Some writers and poets however feel that they need to write about conflict because the national media and the mainstream haven't spoken about it with empathy. However, that doesn't mean that the only stories from Northeast are about conflict, the subterranean tales are never brought to the focus of academic syllabi, just as there are stories of floods and terror, there are also stories of love and peace. (Barman)

Therefore, it is stereotypical to label literature of this region under any uniform head. Just as Northeast India is stereotypically regarded as a homogenous entity, it is also stereotypical to imagine their literature as dealing only with the smell of gun smokes and sound of gun fire, insurgent movements and traumas of the survivors. Their poems and stories - be it in their regional languages or in English - also depict their close relationship with Nature and painted with their creative and imaginative brush of thoughts and words the beautiful landscape, the forests and flowers, the mysterious hill ranges, the charming jhum fields, the enchanting rivers and so on and so forth. Their love for the land, the rivers, their myths and folklore as well as their awareness to the loss of identity due to political forces in the modern times are the common bond of their poetic sensibility.

Talking about the similarities in the poetry from the Northeast region, Chandrakanta Murasingh, a celebrated poet and scholar from Tripura, in an interview with the Poetry International Web titled as “The Thud of Boots and the Odour of Gunpowder” in December 2004, articulates:

Though the Northeast is known as ‘the seven-sister states’, yet we do not know each other all that well. . . Yes, some similarities in the poetry are definitely seen. This is because of the similarities in the landscape and the contemporary situation. The neglect of the region by successive governments seems to be unending . . . Because of this continuing neglect there is now an identity crisis, resulting in unrest . . . In the poetry we hear the shrieks of the victims caught in this vicious conflict.

As the poetry here develops in the lap of hills and descends from there in a cascade of rhythm, it retains its own identity. It has not wandered off like a fleeting cloud. The face

of time has been engraved on the poetry of the Northeast. This is what simultaneously binds the Northeast poets together and differentiates them from each other. (Murasingh)

Poets such as Nandakumar Debbarma, Mamang Dai, Kynpham S. Nongkynrih, Temsula Ao and others vividly portray their love for the land and their intimate relationship with Nature. For example Mamang Dai, a celebrated poet from Arunachal Pradesh, in her poem ‘In An Obscure Place’, regards the mountains as an omniscient entity since they know all about the hill people and everything that happened in the past, present and future (Vohra 45-54). Mamang Dai writes:

There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains.
We climbed every slope. We slept by the river
But do not speak of victory yet. (88-89)

The first two lines remind us of the poet’s intimacy to the mountains that are stored in her memory. In short, the memory of the mountains and its physical presence is a perfect bridge between the present and the future with the past. Because the indwellers do not measure their bondship in terms of self-glory, victory and triumph what the alien or foreign invaders usually advanced. A place which is home engenders homeliness and love only.

Likewise, the Shillong poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih also filled his pages with the image of his beloved land. His love for Cherrapunjee and its natural beauty finds expression can be seen in these lines:

Cherra, dear Meikha,
Crowds have sung for you,
Competing Sunday bells
Tolling abroad your pulchritude

Those foamy-white cascading ornaments,
 Your roaring falls;
 those leafy green dresses
 your musical forests. (20)

Besides these, writings of the other northeast Indian poets, Nature and land form a major theme in the Kokborok poetry. The Borok poets, who mainly write in their native Kokborok language, have a strong rootedness to their land. The Borok people are deeply attached to their land, hills and rivers, which the poets often celebrated in their poems. For example, in an expressly romantic Kokborok lyric, “A House by the Riverside”, Nandakumar Debbarma has subtly expressed in the last four lines of the poem the contrast between human proneness to death and the rivers’ perennial flow:

Because the poet is a man, he dies.
 Often he will be murdered. Then Hwangho, Mekong and
 Gomatee will gush a collective wail,
 Causing a new river island to grow for human habitation. (101)

In this, it is subtly implied that the collective sufferings of the people remembered over changing times will work as a new landmark of identity for the next generations. It also implies, the memory of collective experiences such as – death, murder and trauma of the past and history would historically be usable as marker of identity for the people. The rivers identify again the land of the Boroks. In this connection, a postcolonial critic, Homi K. Bhabha, too, postulates that world

literature should be studied in terms of the historical trauma people have suffered – “a focus on . . . the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical past” (12).

In this poem, Nandakumar also portrays the people’s close relationship with Nature and land. He specifically mentioned certain rivers like – Hwangho, Mekong and the Gomatee and portrays them as a metaphor of the landscape inhabited by his people:

When the time is ripe for these places
 not me – but someone in my likeness, one who in secret
 loves life will walk ahead.
 I know there will be friends and fellow travelers
 along the banks of the Hwangho and the Mekong
 singing with sunrise the songs of dispelling mists
 as the eastern windows open up in the Longtorai Hills. (100)

For him, these rivers and hills have something that holds some secrets of life which he wanted to be passed down to the new generation. Here, what is evident is that these rivers and hills store memories of the poet, and so they are always a part of him which incessantly remind him of his past experiences. This love of Nature resonances throughout the lines of his poems, as in his other poems like – “Rain After the Drought”, “A Dream Baffling the Whirlwind” and “Myself Beside Me” natural entities like – whirlwind, drought, rainfall, clouds, sun, skies, and so on are featured and personified attractively and are also used, sometimes, as a metaphor or simile for depicting his creative imagination. For example, in the “Rain After the Drought” we see rain “stitching the

ruptured land” (101) and the sun “take[s] birth as a child, / wielding a sword of light,” (102) in “A Dream Baffling the Whirlwind”. In short, his depiction of Nature and other physical entities reveals his close association with them.

Nandakumar, like some other Borok poets, regards Nature as an inseparable element in the life of the hill people. The Boroks, too, like some other tribal population are forest dwellers and their livelihood is mostly dependent on Nature. Due to their close relationship with Nature, their respect and emotional connections to Nature can very often be seen in their folktales, folk songs and the contemporary stories and poetry. For them, Nature is not only a life giver but also an important factor that shaped their identity. In his poem, “Jungle”, Nandakumar portrays his close attachment to Nature and also emphasises on the importance of forest to the Boroks’ life. His depiction of the emotional relationship between men and Nature is very significant:

You cannot abandon her,
 She is embedded in your heart.
 Neither consumed by fire,
 Nor destroyed by water,
 waking up in your dreams
 she speaks to you.
 You too cannot wipe her out,
 she is wrapped in your emotions. (23)

Nandakumar regards Nature and landscape as playing an intrinsic part in shaping the Borok identity because their culture and tradition have developed on the laps of the hills, rivers, forest, bird songs, etc. For this reason, he often used natural objects as symbols for representing the Borok

culture and identity. In his poem, “A Dream Baffling the Whirlwind”, Nandakumar laments over his shattered identity, which in the poem is represented by a tuft of thread falling off from the loom, the fragmented songs, and the dry flowers he had tucked in the bun of his hair while coming down from the dream hill:

With a tuft of thread off the loom,

some fragments of songs

I come down the slope of the dream hill

and tuck some dry flowers in the bun of my hair. (102)

Here, the images of the tuft of thread falling off the loom, the fragmented songs and the dry flowers, all suggest the falling apart of certain elements that shaped the Borok culture and identity from the center that can hold no longer:

On the river bank of domesticity,

at sunset,

my granny ruefully sings bird-songs.

I do not know how to make her see

the whirlwind of present times

that have eclipsed the feasts of that harvest festival night. (102)

The poet has captured in lines and images of grandmother, bird-song and sunset not merely the sense of what is past, but also the ironic twists of the time. While the granny is aware of melancholic strains of the sunset, the poet is more disturbed by present crisis, being oppressed by the loss of sunshine from life. The poet's loss is however more urgent. Again, the phrase, "the whirlwind of present times" also implies the present socio-political and economical condition of the Boroks in Tripura, and also the influence of other culture and tradition, the persistent conflict situations that eclipsed the vibrant Borok culture which is strongly rooted in Nature.

Sudhanya Tripura, too, reflects in his poetry the life and experiences of the people – mainly the jhumias – in some of his poems like – the "Woo-Wang" where a vivid picture of the jhum field and the stilt-house can be found; the "Mad Piper" which describes the daily experiences of a mad piper "keeping the fishing net / on the bank" (300) of a river while playing his flute, with a brief and colorful description of the natural surroundings as a background; and the "Displaced Heart" which portrays the life of the rural people and their daily sufferings and experiences. Most of Sudhanya's poems employ symbolism in expressing the deep desires of the poet's consciousness to her identity and the threats that haunt it. For example, in his poem, "The Displaced Heart", Sudhanya has effectively used the image of forest and jhum field as representing the identity and culture of the Borok. In the first four lines Sudhanya portrays a frustrated man, Puslati Tripura whose mind has been displaced as his jhum fields have been burnt down and destroyed by flames of fire that ended him feel desolated and lonesome in the forest:

In the scorched jhum fields,

in a bamboo stilt-house

the heart of Puslati Tripura

is sunken in loneliness.

The house built with his ribs

burns in the flames of terror.

The vultures fly with their ancient craze. (302)

The fire that destroyed Puslati's jhum field has left him displaced and isolated as the forest and the fields have always been an integral part of his life:

Inside the deep forest

Pulati's displaced heart

trembles in deep lamentation. (302)

Here, the forest symbolises the Borok culture and tradition that form a significant aspect in shaping the Borok identity. However, the fire symbolises any external forces that burn down certain elements (as symbolised by the jhum field and the stilt-house) that hold together the Borok identity and culture. The significance of the jhum field and the forest in the cultural life of the Boroks is also vividly portrayed by the poet.

Sudhanya's deep aspiration for retaining his cultural heritage may clearly be seen in most of his poems. For instance, in his most-celebrated poem "And the Dream Bird" he subtly projects his deep desire to pass down the rich heritage of their culture and tradition to the coming generation through writing:

And the dream bird

voluntarily descends

according to my wish

on the lines of my poetry.

Just now it has offered a feather

to my child. (303)

Here, the desires and dreams of the poet have been personified as a dream bird which carries certain aspects of Borok culture and flies through ages:

And a dream bird comes flying

and perches on my night

filled with sleep,

shoots of sprouting grains,

paddy plants, medicinal roots

are in its beak. (303)

Here, the poet has revealed unconscious desire for paddy, grains, and medicines which are not available in plenty to her people in these days of scarcity. These images again point to an absence of the fulfilled Borok culture that once existed in its fullness. Again, certain aspects that hold together the center of their culture have been specified by the poet by mentioning: the “shoots of sprouting grains”, the “paddy plants”, the “medicinal roots” and the age-old “stories” (303) told by their forefathers. This reveals the poet’s association of Nature, land and old stories with that of

his cultural identity. In this connection, Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih talking about the contemporary literature of the Northeast India in the introduction of their highly-acclaimed anthology *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* write:

A strong rootedness [is] visible everywhere in the writings of this region. The roots of the beloved land; the roots of the people's culture; the root of the times; and most of all, the roots of the past, have sunken deep into their poetry and has given it a unique savour.

That these poets are bound together by their great love for the land and everything that it signifies can be seen in the overarching presence of nature in many of their poems. (xii)

Thus, it is very explicable to mention that the Borok poets' desire to retain and preserve their culture and identity manifested in their poems which encompass a dominant theme of rootedness to their land and past experiences.

Another recurring theme that can be found in the poems of the contemporary Borok poets is the theme of awareness of the misrepresentation constructed by the mainstream literature that threatens their ethnic identity and also the present socio-economic factors that led to their marginalisation and sufferings in their daily life. For example, Shefali Debbarma in her poem "Lamination" grieves over the scheduled tribe card stereotyping the Borok identity:

The Scheduled Tribe certificate card

Was issued under seal and signature

Of the Sub-Divisional Officer,

In the year I was born. (107)

She had used significant images of *risa* and *pachhra*, the traditional Borok dress, against a laminated identity card thrust upon them by metanarratives:

Lest the valuable paper gets soiled

Mother kept it in the folds of *risa* and *pachhra*,

Within the *khuturuk*. (107)

This juxtaposition of the Borok traditional dress and the laminated identity card used by the government is highly significant in the sense that both represent discourse and definition given by the respective cultures: the *risa* and the *pachhra* represent anything that signifies the culture and tradition of the Boroks, on the other hand, the government paper signifies the mainstream discourse or the fixed identity thrust upon by the government. The outcome of these two things placed together inside the *khuturuk* after a century years, as mentioned in the last two stanza, is also highly significant:

After a hundred years, today,

The favourite dress of *risa* and *pachhra*

Has worn out, turning into shreds.

The white ants have eaten up the *khuturuk*;

But only the S. T. Card still remains bright and crisp,

Laminated and framed. (108)

With the passage of time, the traditional dress has worn out and then turns into shreds and the khuturuk, too, has been eaten up by white ants; however, the S. T. Card remains intact for it was neatly laminated and framed, and every moment on demand for certifying one's identity. These last two stanzas expose how vulnerable people's culture can be when it has been completely exposed to the dominant culture without being laminated and framed by an acceptable representation.

Contemporary stories and poetry that sprang out in the Northeastern region of India, in many ways, have similar themes which became a part of the nationalist agenda of identity-assertion. According to Tilottoma Misra, after the introduction of print culture into the northeast India region during the colonial era, "collecting, re-telling, and printing the folklore of the different communities became an important part of the colonial ethnographic agenda of mapping the region for more effective administrative control over the bewildering variety of races that the British encountered" (xvii). This however created misrepresentation and marginalisation of their culture and tradition. These people, "whose history and civilization had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the norms of the Eurocentric concept of modernity, took up the task of re-creating their past and re-inventing tradition so as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process of marching from the past to the future" (Misra xvii). Thus, for them, collecting and printing their own oral and written literature became a part of the nationalist agenda of identity-assertion.

This practice of re-writing and re-inventing their own history and culture by creating a new set of literature, by conscious adopting the elements of their oral tradition is a growing worldwide phenomenon; it is also found amongst some communities in the African countries. For instance, the main focus of the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart* is the

incorporation of the traditional practices and rituals, the myths and the vibrant story telling tradition, the old gods and goddesses in his story. In his essay, “The African writer and the English Language” (1964), Achebe states that African literature should be defined as having the “the complexities of the African scene” otherwise it is “doomed to failure” (75). Likewise, his main aim in writing this novel is to create an anti-orientalist discourse which will give an authentic depiction of the pre-colonial Igbo community.

In the case of the northeastern Indian people, this re-writing of ethnic history has become more urgent because the “Sense of being denied fair representation in the great Indian civilizational discourse or even in the nationalist discourse, has deeply affected the emerging literati of many of the regions of north-east India in the post-Independence era” (Misra xviii). The impact of globalisation and mass culture, and the invasion of an alien culture that created progressiveness and modernity which compels the indigenous people abandon some elements of their own culture has also been the subject matter in many writings from the region. This has also been a sensitive case to the contemporary Borok writers. The metanarrative of the *Rajmala* (of the fifteenth century) which situated the Boroks’ ancient history and the royal heritage into the Hindu mythology has appropriated the Boroks into the Hindu mainstream, and has ignored the lived-experiences and social life of the common Borok people. The contemporary Borok poets, however, try to portray in their poems, the everyday life of the common people who have developed an intrinsic relationship with their surrounding environment and their cultural life which is mainly based on their interaction with Nature. So, what arises is the perceived difference between the Boroks and the *Rajmala*-centric history of Tripura. For such Borok people, who developed a psychological bond with the landscape they have inhabited for thousands of years and the local

flora and fauna, cultural identity remains a psychological creation that is strongly rooted in the local landscape and natural environment.

The great influx of Bengali refugees before and after the Partition of India, which made the indigenous people into a small minority, consisting only around thirty percent of the population, has also been a significant factor that marginalised the indigenous Borok culture in Tripura. According to Misra, such neglects inevitably resulted in the rise of ethnic mobilisation and a long-drawn military struggle for identity preservation by the tribal groups of the region (xxvi). The present situation also witnessed the continuing struggle of the indigenous people demanding for their separate homeland. The contemporary Borok writers, too, express their grievances and rootedness in their literary pieces to challenge all kinds of stereotypes and misrepresentation of their cultural identity and also their deprived condition at present times.

In his poem, “As I Am”, Chandrakanta Murasingh brings out the irony by juxtaposing the traditional Borok values with that of the modern values. In the first stanza, he artistically describes how singing and dancing work well for him; on the other hand, the dances that are performed for money have no value for him:

You have asked me to sing,

Well, I can.

I can even leap-frog and spring –

Working out a number in dance,

But don't ask for money

To organize a dance troupe.

I need the money to buy a horse,

Me and horse, the pair of us, shall jump, shall fight,

Will go to places where your car cannot. (185)

Here the juxtaposition of horse and car is very significant. The horse, which serves as a traditional means of transportation, represents the traditional Borok culture; and the car, which serves as a modern means of transportation, represents the new culture and society that evolved with the coming of modernity and globalisation. The poem also reveals that even living in a society influenced by the new and modern culture, his sentiments still cling on to the traditional Borok values and traditions which become old and outdated to the new generation.

The modern literature from Tripura [most of which have taken shape in Kokborok language] displays a sense of rootedness and consciousness to their past history. Their comments on certain situations and activities like the military struggle, the unrest situation (as seen in short stories like “Gangacharan’s Chompreng” by Debabrata Deb, “Basan’s Grandmother” by Bimal Singha, etc.) and their strong sense of rootedness in their depiction of their landscape and natural surroundings constitute the main theme in most of their writings. Their love for the land, their intimate attachment to the landscape, the psychological bond they are having with the forests and the rivers are visible in their poetry. It is through this depiction, the Borok poets of today try to reclaim their history and cultural identity. The issue of reclaiming cultural identity in Tripura has been more conflated with the political desire of certain Borok groups.

The problem with most of the insurgent groups in Tripura is also a historical one that relates to the preservation of their ethnic identity through creating a separate state or nation of their own. However, many writers are divided in this process; there are writers like Debabrata Deb who chose

the non-violent path and proposed for the reclamation of identity through continuous meditation on the rich cultural heritage of the past. There are poets like – Chandrakanta Murasingh who being preoccupied by the agonies of contemporary Tripura, are continuously seeking for the reclamation of the Borok identity by implanting the rich cultural heritage (by depicting the typical Tripuri landscape and the natural surroundings) into the people’s mind through their poetry. On the other hand, there are poets like Narendra Debbarma whose ideology opposed the concept of ‘border’ proposed by the postmodern sensibilities.

In his poem, “The Border”, Narendra Debbarma portrays how his little daughter misunderstood the modern concept of bordering:

‘This far is our limit

we can’t cross the border

and go to the other side.’

The little daughter of mine didn’t understand.

Baffled, she asked, ‘Where’s the border?

Only this patch of land stretches itself there.

Why can’t we go there?’”

. . . In my mind, I said

You’re an innocent child

and that’s why, alas,

you know not

where the border does exist! (101)

The border, that is politically christened and constructed, exists in the mind of the conscious elders, and which the child is not initiated into, so far. Physical geography has no border as innocence has no border. The above lines also depict the ideological struggles that take place in the contemporary world politics, not only in Tripura. The two groups of ideologies being – the postidentitarian as represented by the innocent daughter and the statist conservatives who adhere the conventional notion of identity politics as represented by the father or the poet himself.

Looking at the contemporary world politics, ethnic nationalism with its stress on creating their own history and identity has always lead to demanding or creating their own separate or sovereign geopolitical space which will act as an epistemic space for their ethnic identity to flourish and prosper. The recent struggles made by the indigenous political parties – the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Twipra (INPT), the National Conference of Tripura (NCT) and others, inside the Tripura Tribal Autonomous District area are one instance of the Tripura politics being taking a sociological turn like the contemporary world politics.

Thus, one significant theme we found in the contemporary poetry of the Borok poets is their stress on the significant relationship between land and identity. Their poems show their intimate relationship with land and Nature, which by depicting in their poetry they try to portray the rich cultural heritage of the Borok society which has a strong connection to the rivers, the mighty mountains, the beautiful hill slopes and the forest with its musical rivulets and swirling leaves. It is the continued connections which come alive between the ancient land of dreams of the Borok grandmother and the modern Tripura of conflicts. In contemporary poetry, there is no

reference whatsoever as made to the *Rajmala* narrative or its royal history to testify if such metanarratives is unquestionable in the present era of identity questions.

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CHAPTER IV:
CONTEXTUALISING LITTLE NARRATIVES OF THE BOROKS

CHAPTER IV

Contextualising Little Narratives of the Boroks

It can be observed that the cultural history and identity of the Boroks have been influenced and distorted by its long proximity to Bengal (as mentioned in the introduction), which has a much bigger and stronger culture, and also by the great influx of Bengali refugees before and after the Indian Independence. This persistent problem of refugee influx has turned the local inhabitants into a small minority in their own land (Misra xxvi). They now comprise of only thirty percent of the total Tripura population, which inevitably resulted in the rise of ethnic mobilisation and a long-drawn militant struggle for identity preservation by the tribal groups of the region (Misra xxvi).

Stories that emerge from this region contain and depict the condition of the people - their experiences and lives, their daily activities and the socio-political activities persistent in this small state of the northeastern India. As most fictional and non-fictional works function, stories and tales from this region provide a vivid portrayal of the contemporary social, economic, political and cultural life of the Borok people, and in this case they serve as a tool in depicting the history of the Borok tribe. As the New Historicists often argue, fictional writing or text has historicity as it is embedded in the social and cultural context, and history has a claim to textuality as we have no access to the lived authentic past, and only traces of it are preserved. New Historicism treats a work of literature not as a story worthy of analysis but as a representation of historical forces. This modern school of literary criticism considers the social, cultural, historical, economic and political implications of the text. Stephen Greenblatt defines New Historicism as “a shift away from a

criticism centered on ‘verbal icons’ toward a criticism centered on cultural artifacts” (3). He also says that both the historical and the literary have a mutually beneficial roles and recommends for a parallel reading of the literary and non-literary texts of the same historical period.

Like some writings of other writers from Northeast India, the Borok writers depict in their story the theme of insurgency, ethnic violence, identity, nationhood, corruption, memory, the ecology of the region and the simple everyday life of the common people. The theme of insurgency and violence, for instance, can clearly be seen in the short story “Basan’s Grandmother” by Bimal Singha and “Gangacharan’s Champreng” by Debabrata Deb. Both stories are set in a situation when an ethnic movement was at its highest force in the state of Tripura.

Debabrata Deb’s short story, “Gangacharan’s Chompreng” gives a vivid image of the everyday life of the Boroks during the insurgency period. At the beginning of the story, we are reminded of how the common people are the victims of the situation as both the underground militants and the police’s constant activities became a big burden for them. In the story, we see that Rabichandra, the protagonist, still remembers the frequent presence of his childhood friends, now the armed rebels, Kamdar and Abhiram in his house compelling him to join the armed rebellion instead of relying on his small business. And we also see police men barging into his hut while his wife Biran is delivering a baby:

And then the bamboo door shook with violent kicks, and was shattered with six gunshots. ‘Open the door, Rabichandra, you bastard.’ The intruders had yelled as if in tune with Biran’s final scream of anguish when Purna appeared on the devastating scene smeared with gunpowder and dust. And that strange scene had saved them that night. (Deb 127)

As Kamdar and Abhiram frequently visited Rabichandra's hut in order to cajole him to join the rebels, Rabichandra and his family became a prime suspect for the police, who regularly interrogated him and even tortured him expecting to get some information about his childhood friends:

And the police visited the village regularly looking for them (the rebels) leaving reddish marks of their misadventures on Rabichandra's back and face. And on the bodies of others, too. And still they lived, as did Kamdar and his comrades, visiting them as guests for a night, keeping everyone starving in the household. (129)

However, Rabichandra still desires to follow a non-violent path in order to improve his condition. He continuously strives for a peaceful coexistence as symbolised by his continuous seeking for his father's musical instrument, the chompreng. This represents the dilemma in the minds of the Borok people. The story juxtaposed contrasting characters like – Kamdar and Abhiram, who by any means try to preserve their land and identity through violent ways; and Rabichandra, who in order to get back to their root takes a peaceful path. However, the concluding part of the story reveals that Rabichandra is uncertain of his son, who as the story depicts, is likely to follow a more violent path like Kamdar and his friends:

Rabichandra went into the room with a rush. He needed the chompreng today; at this very moment. If he could not get it right now he was likely to lose Sindhukumar for good. It was the naked truth that faced him now. (134)

The present situation does not leave the new generation unaffected. The continuous and unending deprivation of the Borok people compelled them to take arms for defending their dream of identity.

In the case of Tripura, insurgency can be regarded as a kind of expression and a discourse of difference put forth by the alienating communities. It uses a politics of violence to tackle the ongoing discourse of subjugation by the dominant community. For Prasenjit Biswas and Chandan Suklabaidya, insurgency is a kind of counter-hegemonic struggle led by the oppressed community:

Insurgency signifies a moment of rupture or disruption that generates a counter discourse to the already experienced milieu of subjugation, alienation and compulsion. It articulates a sense of dispossession and betrayal tinged with the pathos of coercion and violence. . . . It (insurgency) adopts a politics of combat and resistance to the ongoing discourse of subjugation and derives its sustenance from rupturing the dominant images. (153)

In the story, “Basan’s Grandmother”, Bimal Singha (like Debabrata Deb) artistically conveys his message to the people about the futility of ethnic conflict while vividly portraying the conflicts and clashes between the tribals and non-tribals of the 1980s. Bimal’s short story focuses on the life of a small hill-tribe child and an old Bengali woman. The story is set in the late twentieth century Tripura, a period when the state has witnessed a series of ethnic clashes and violence between the hill tribes (mostly the Boroks) and the non-hill tribes (the Bengalis). The two families – one tribal and the other Bengali – live amicably in adjacent homes. The tribal child Bansiram (or simply Basan) is very attached to the old woman and grows up in her lap. He is obviously a link between the two families; and the old woman too is very much attached to him. Hatred and clashes now flare up between the two communities; many people died and houses were burnt down in different places. Seized in the midst of turmoil and unrest situation, the old woman takes the child and runs for their safety. There was one point, when the grandmother has to choose her life or the child’s. However, in the end both are killed by a single spear that pierced the two bodies. The irony

is that the war, commenced by the strong forces victimised the most vulnerable ones – the old woman and the child. However, in death both are unified beyond ethnic differences.

This theme of insurgency creates one major theme, not only in contemporary Kokborok literature, but also in many creative writings from the northeast region of India. This is because of the region's long experience of conflict and insurgency:

Almost all the eight states face the problem of insurgency, with more than fifty insurgent groups operating in these states, which together has a population of 3.85 crore, according to the 2001 census – about 3.75 per cent of the total population of the country. Thus, today for the common people in the region, life is an everyday existential crisis, caught as they are in the crossfire between the insurgents, the government's counter-insurgency operations and the resultant vicious circle of insecurity, vulnerability, hopelessness, death and violence in addition to the ever-present problems of corruption, poverty and unemployment. (Zama 9)

The post-Independence period saw the entire section of Northeast India became more sensitive to their ethnic identity and nationality. There may be certain reasons behind it, but, some of the main conditions are – economic exploitation, alienation of the natives from their homeland, cultural assimilation, population assimilation, economic and political control by the new established authority and rapid immigration to the tribal lands. In the case of Tripura, insurgency and government's counter-insurgent undertakings became a serious problem for the people especially during the post-Independence era. The reason for this is obviously due to the great influx of Bengali refugees during the partition period, which resulted in the assimilation – land and

population – of the native inhabitants. Chandrika Basu, tracing the emergence of insurgency movements in Tripura and some factor responsible for armed rebellions, in her article, “Tribal Insurgency in Tripura: Perspective and Issues” writes:

During the colonial rule the tribal areas were largely untouched and isolated from the rest of the country. The entire of outsiders was strictly restricted and the tribals were left to manage their own affairs. With the advent of independence and with the improvement of communications, the traders, new politically oriented missionaries and the land grabbers made inroads into the tribal society. The problem was compounded by a large influx of refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). In Tripura, it even changed the demographic situation against the tribals. The tribals no longer feel secure in their home and are fearful of their domination and exploitation in every respect. (357)

The above lines reveal the Boroks’ sense of exploitation and loss of identity with the rapid growth of Bengali (and other non-natives) population in the region. Basu further mentions that, this “intermittent influx of refugees into Tripura after the partition of India reduced the percentage of tribal population in the state from 50.09 per cent in 1941 to 28.95 percent in 1971” (353). Due to this population and land assimilation, there began an ethnocentric feeling among the native inhabitants, which gradually led to the emergence of certain [militant] organisations like – the ‘Seng-Krak’ in 1947, the Adivasi Samsad in 1954, the Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS) in 1967 to protect the interest of the tribal people. And the flame of ethnic nationalism spread with the emergence of the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) in July 1979 under the leadership of Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl, whose main objective was “to establish an independent tribal state of Tripura by ousting the legally constituted government through armed struggle” (Basu 354). The result is

that hundreds of tribal and non-tribal lost their lives and hundreds of them were dislocated from their homes.

The state government took certain measures to tackle the problem in terms of granting an autonomous district council for the hill people, and reservation of seats for the tribals in the Legislative Assembly, the condition became worse with the emergence of newly educated tribal students whose main concern is to preserve not only their land, but their cultural heritage which is totally marginalised by the dominant discourse of the region. The formation of the 'Indigenous Nationalist Party of Twipra' (INPT) in 2002 under the leadership of Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl, whose main objective is to unite all tribal nationalist forces in a single party, triggers this nationalist sentiment among the people. One significant step taken by this new nationalist movement is the deep desire to return to their root and dismantle the metanarratives of the dominant discourse and create a discourse of their own in order to preserve their own cultural heritage. This attempt of going back to the root can clearly be seen in the contemporary works of the Borok writers. For example, in his short story, "Gangacharan's Chompreng", a Borok writer Debabrata Deb has tried to respond to the present socio-cultural conflicts which affect the life of the Boroks in general. In the story, the chompreng, which is a traditional musical instrument of the Borok tribe, signifies anything that represents the rich cultural heritage of the people, and also signifies any medium through which a going-back-to-the-old times can be made possible by continuously invoking the muse that inspired their ancestors. This theme of rootedness is one of the most popular themes that can be found in the writings of the Northeastern writers including Desmond L. Kharmawphlang (Meghalaya), Robin S. Ngangom (Manipur) and others, by employing folklores and folk songs in

their poetry, revisited the long-lost past and the rich cultural tradition of their forefathers. This is one technique that they often used in order to re-identify and re-present their identity.

In “Gangacharan’s Chompreng”, we see Rabi, a common man, who by earning his daily salary by running a small shop five miles away from his home in order to feed his wife and his five children, continuously seeking for a much better life in the realm of an unrest situation filled with gun smokes and powders. Unlike his friends Kamdar and Abhiram, he chooses a peaceful way in order to improve his condition. For him, the chompreng is an inspiration, an instrument that can take him back to his ancestor’s times. So, instead of engaging in military actions, he decides to engage himself in invoking the muse that offered inspiration to their forefathers, revisit their old ways by singing their song, re-identify himself with their old-selves by playing the tunes that they once played under the moonlit night. This is how he attempted to re-identify himself in such a gloomy and terrifying situation. And this is also how the author himself tries to re-present his identity.

Similar with Deb’s story “Gangacharan’s Chompreng”, Bimal Singha’s story “Basan’s Grandmother” vividly depicts the ethnic clashes between the tribals and non-tribals which plagued almost everyone in the society. Bimal has cling to Debabrata Deb’s idea of the futility of ethnic conflicts and his suggestion and recommendation to take the peaceful path in order to improve the Boroks’ deprived condition. The two characters – Kamdar and Abhiram, on the other hand, represent certain sections of the Borok people, who are compelled by their unending deprivations to take up arms in order to improve their condition. In the story, it is clear that, apart from preservation of their ethnic identity, Kamdar and his comrades’ motive in taking arms was to

improve their economic condition. While persuading Rabichandra to join their militant group, we come to know of Kamdar's basic intention in joining the insurgent group:

Kamdar had exhorted him, almost cajoled him lovingly, 'What the hell are you doing, tilling others' fields for a few bucks, unable to fill up so many bellies! Better come along and be independent as we are. Why, just look at what I have got from yesterday's struggle.' Kamdar had pulled out a bunch of notes, a pair of gold ear-rings and necklace from his side pocket and laugh out with satisfaction. (Deb 130-131)

Asthana and Nirmal argue that, violence is only one of the many means to achieving their (the deprived group/s) goal in improving their condition (19-20). They further argue that, violence also serves the purpose of propagating the cause of the insurgency to both the general public, whose opinion and support will effect and influence to a large extent the end result of an insurgency, and the government against whom the insurgency is initiated (22). However, insurgent groups and insurgency, in spite of representing their people, on behalf of whom they are fighting, often betray the cause that conceived their movement in the first place and become a huge burden to its own people; this aspect of insurgency is explored by the two selected short stories – "Gangacharan's Chompreng" and "Basan's Grandmother". For example, Kamdar and his comrades in "Gangacharan's Grandmother", whose main motive seems to be improving the economic, social and political condition of the Borok peoples, turned more violent towards even the most vulnerable people in the society in order to raise funds for their insurgent group:

Why, just look at what I have got from yesterday's struggle. Kamdar had pulled out a bunch of notes, a pair of gold ear-rings and necklace from his side pocket and laugh out

with satisfaction. Rabichandra's body was shaking with repulsion. He had heard all about the incident. In all, five persons had been killed, including woman. (Deb 130-131)

It is this flaw (at least from the perception of the common people) that accompanied the violent armed struggle that discouraged Rabichandra to get involved with arms.

Bimal's short story, "Bansan's Grandmother" gives a vivid picture of the typical Tripura landscape, the everyday life of the common people and their lifestyle. Basan and his parents live on a hillock beside Howrah River, and we also come to know that Basan's father was previously a jhum cultivator, however, the family now worked on the Assam-Agartala border road to earn their living. This small information gives us the transformation in the economic life of the Borok people. It can be said that the change in the demographic profile of Tripura due to an influx of refugees has aggravated the sufferings of the poor native tribes. It is believed that "between 1947 to 1971, more than 600,000 refugees entered the state... [and] the first impact of the refugee influx into Tripura was the opening of the state's forest interiors for the settlement of refugees" (Ghosh 230). As the economy of Tripura previously was based on jhum cultivation and most immigrants are cultivators, "such rehabilitation led to a greater pressure on the jhum land in the hills and a fall in per-acre productivity due to the increase in the jhum cycle. Subhir Bhaumik in his article, "Tripura: Ethnic Conflict, Militancy and Counterinsurgency" mentions with figures that some reserve areas for the tribals have been misplaced by the government for the settlement of the refugees:

[The government has] allowed thousands of Bengali refugees into core tribal areas earmarked by King Bir Bikram Manikya Bahadur as a Tribal Reserve. The

tribespeople had good reasons to feel that they were being reduced to ‘foreigners in their own land’. In 1943, King Bir Bikram had earmarked 1950 sq. miles as Tribal Reserve, but in 1948, the Regent Maharani’s Dewan, A.B. Chatterji (vide order no. 325 dated 10th Aswin, 1358 Tripura Era or 1948 AD) threw open 300 sq. miles of this reserve for refugee settlement. Later, more of these areas were opened up for refugee settlement. (6)

Along with this, the state-sponsored modernisation scheme as suggested by the Tripura maharajas themselves prohibited the native tribes to practice their jhum cultivation. This led to a shift in their economic life and many of them have to work as labourers in plantations, mines, construction of roads and railway tracks. Here the participation of the womenfolk is very less and the traditional system of division of labour has to be altered. According to Ghosh this created huge problems to the native tribes:

There were large-scale evictions of tribals from the lands and forests due to government - sponsored development schemes like the Dumbur Nagar Hydroelectric Project, rubber plantation, etc. All these had put the jhum cultivators into a vicious circle of poverty, indebtedness and dependency (on the Bengali money lenders). (231)

In the story “Basan’s Grandmother” we see Basan’s father working as labourer on the Assam-Agartala border road to earn his daily wage. Cultivating crops in a jhum field is now unimaginable for them as cultivating in the same jhum field for years does not yield much for them. The unavailability of land for practicing jhum cultivation creates a great problem to them. In “Gangacharan’s Chompreng” we also see the protagonist Rabichandra struggling for his daily salary by running a small shop five miles away from his home in order to feed his family. In the

first part of the story we come to know that the shop is an alternation to his failure in running a jhum cultivation:

Rabichandra had thought it over and over again. Jhum cultivation was real costly these days. He had no ploughing bulls for the little land he had prepared on the hill slopes. No loan would be provided by the banks for such a small plot of land. His attempt to grow paddy by borrowing/hiring bulls yielded no results. It had all been fruitless labour. (Deb 125-126)

As mentioned earlier, shifting cultivation or jhum has been an age-old method of agriculture practiced by the Boroks. This is because in a region like Tripura (before an influx of refugees) where the population is very less, shifting cultivation has some advantages; for instance, the land being left fallow recovers lost nutrients, the practice supports agro-biodiversity, and the yield is higher compared to single crop production. And most importantly, the people have an intimate relationship with the forest, and the shifting cultivation binds the forest communities to their cultural identity. However, with the misplacement of a large tribal areas for the settlement of the refugees, and the government's scheme of modernisation that promoted settled agriculture, the indigenous tribals have to "switch over either to settled cultivation, in which the scope for participation of women is less, or to cultivate the same jhum land for years" (Ghosh 233). And it is an obvious truth that only families of a higher economic status are able to reasonably afford large tracts of land required for settled cultivation. This switch from the jhum to the settled cultivation "had put the jhum cultivators into a vicious circle of poverty, indebtedness and dependency (on the Bengali money lenders)" (Ghosh 233). Ghosh puts up statistically:

The tribals with less-developed skills. . . failed to compete on equal terms with the Bengalis. The emergence of class-based agrarian structure in Tripura has impoverished most of the tribals. Thus, the work participation (main) rate of tribes has come down from 51.51 percent in 1961 to 32.03 percent in 1991. In contrast, there is some increase in the number of tribal agricultural labourers in the state during the same period: While one could hardly notice tribals working as agricultural labourers even 20 years back, in 1991 they constituted nearly 10 percent of the tribal population. (232)

Thus, both the stories, “Basan’s Grandmother” and “Gangacharan’s Chompreng” may be regarded as stories depicting the impoverished life of the Boroks, who being unable to practice jhum are in the middle of adopting to the more modern method of agriculture. Rabichandra does not have the skill or money to practice a settled cultivation even by borrowing/hiring bulls to plough his small plot of land. And Bansan’s father, too, unable to practice jhum, instead works on the Assam-Agartala border road to earn their daily living. Stories written by the contemporary Borok writers, thus, portray the plight and sufferings of the common Borok people and their deprivation exaggerated by population assimilation and with the coming of modernity in the society. However, the Boroks’ sense of deprivation is caused not only by economic and political factors but also by the social and cultural factors that led to the loss of their cultural identity.

A vibrant tradition of Bengali that has been developed in Tripura is a result of the Tripuri rulers’ close relationship with the Bengal (pre-Independence) state. It is also known that the Tripura royal court had invited many Bengali poets and scholars and Bengali writers were patronised by the Tripura rulers. Thus, the Bengali literature left great influences on the people, and as the language was later used for administrative purposes “a vibrant tradition of Bengali

literature had developed in the region” (Misra xxvi). The famous Indian author Rabindranath Tagore, too, was a frequent visitor of Tripura and Maharaja Birchandra Manikya Bahadur (r. 1870-1896). The ethnic voice of the Boroks, however, was not reflected in the dominant discourse; therefore a pre-literate Borok people without script remain unrepresented in literary domains until recent decade. The dominant narrative provided by the *Rajmala* is, thus, further consolidated by the region’s interactions with neighbouring culture especially that of the Bengalis.

However, most recent Borok writers present stories and poems which do not corroborate the idea and their identity as presented in the *Rajmala*. The *Rajmala* written in the fifteenth century AD may not be an Orientalist discourse, but it is a discourse which sang of the lineage of royalty and forgot the peasantry and commons. Keeping in view the constructed stereotypes in Orientalist discourses, one would suspect of a deep-rooted alienation dynamics adopted by the royally high and dominant classes in ancient Tripura. Edward Said, drawing from Foucault’s notion of power relations and discourse argues:

Orientalism is a discourse of the west about the east, a huge body of texts- literary, topographical, anthropological, historical and sociological- that have been accumulating since the renaissance. Said is concerned to show how this discourse is at once self validating, constructing certain stereotypes which become accepted as self evident fact... in collusion with political, and economic imperialism. (qtd. in Nagarajan 186-187)

The *Rajmala* has had similar functions hitherto recently. It has served as the main discourse, the metanarrative, on the history of the Borok (history here refers to the whole maxims of ethnicity and culture of the Borok tribe). The *Rajmala* has firmly placed the Borok tribes within

a larger cultural paradigm, that of Hinduism. This has dominated discourses on Borok history (ethnicity, identity) from both within and without. S. B. K. Deb Varman in his book, *The Tribes of Tripura: A Dissertation* articulates that, this Sansritisation or Hinduisation process “is going on among the tribals since very long and they are ‘tending towards Hinduism, and that many of them, as they rise in the scale of civilisation, lose their identity in the Hindu Community’” (vii). The result is that the new generations are confronted with identity crisis with the strong influence of the Bengali Hindu culture.

However, the Borok writers put their pen on paper to depict their everyday life and the real image of their life. And in contrary to the *Rajmala*, they insistently depict their relationship with the land, hills and rivers, which they often celebrate in their poems. These places and hills may not have been found in the pages of the *Rajmala*, but these are the places which speak loudly of the everyday life and the imaginative capacities of the Borok people. On this notion, it should be noted that postcolonialists and new historicists are highly suspicious of the authenticity of grand narratives or otherwise known as metanarratives whether it is in the form of history, anthropology, sociology, geography or literary. Drawing on Foucault’s analysis of power, again, all narratives, irrespective of their discipline are all constructed on the influence of the dominant discourse of the historical space in which it is located, as such scholars from the postcolonial discipline and new historicists have deconstructed the authenticity of these narratives and often invoke creative writings such as fictions and poetry as counter-narratives to these discourses. Hence, the selection of creative writings is taken as counter-narrative or little narratives in this study. Creative writings, such as poetry, short story and fiction often portray the ethos, sentiments and ethnicity of certain tribes, that is often absent in non-creative writings, in this case the Borok tribe, which is otherwise

referred to as rootedness. A postcolonial critic, Homi K. Bhabha, too, postulates that world literature should be studied in terms of the historical trauma people have suffered – ‘a focus on . . . the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical past’ (12).

Fictional narratives, unlike historiographical records, offer and portray to the reader the lived, political and social experiences of the people through its characters and can even offer the psychological contours of the people using its characters. In this connection, Mark Currie, a postmodern critic argues:

How can techniques in narrative point of view control a reader’s sympathy for characters? . . . I’ll begin with two basic propositions about sympathy which apply to narrative and life: (1) We are more likely to sympathise with people when we have a lot of information about their inner lives, motivations, fears and so on; and (2) We sympathise with people when we see other people who do not share our success to their inner lives judging them harshly or incorrectly. In life, we get this kind of information through intimacy, friendship or Oprah Winfrey. In fiction we get it through the narrator, either reliably reported by the narrator or through direct access to the minds of characters... Information alone cannot elicit a sympathetic response. Sometimes it is the careful control of the flow of information, of where it comes from and how it is presented, which controls a reader’s judgment. (27-28)

Through their characters, in “Gangacharan’s Chompreng” and “Basan’s Grandmother”, Debabrata Deb and Bimal Singha have given us an in-depth account of the experiences of insurgency; the hardships and the brutalities, the nullified state of state and the failure of administrative and political systems are all portrayed in vivid images. The two characters, a tribal boy Basan and the

non-tribal grandmother in “Basan’s Grandmother”, who are killed at the end of the story with a single spear, represent the futility of ethnic violence. The two bodies – one tribal and the other non-tribal – pierced by a single blow of a spear is highly significant in the sense that it symbolised the unification of the two souls after death beyond ethnic divides. The story also portrays the brutality of insurgency and the pathetic plight of the common people. The conflicting ideologies in Debabrata’s mind towards insurgency and identity are clearly reflected in his depiction of the two characters – Rabichandra and his son, in the short story “Gangacharan’s Chompreng”. The helpless common man, Rabichandra is always against the cult of violence, which has been practiced by many people in their community. It appears that violence is a way of life thrust on the people; however, Rabichandra clings to his ideology and tries hard to earn his living without embracing the path of violence. The frustration of Rabichandra can be understood when he becomes uncertain of his son who is likely to follow the violent path. This frustration is intensified by his failure in finding the lost chompreng, an instrument that he dreams to play and experience the musical notes that influenced their forefathers. Rabichandra’s son represents the new generation’s leading towards violence due to the continuous and unending deprivation of the Borok people.

There has been a shift in literary and creative appreciation of culture and identity in the contemporary Kokborok narratives. While the emerging Borok writers depict in their poems and stories, the contemporary social problems, the continuous sufferings of the people, the Boroks’ experiences of violence, theme of rootedness and the sense of awareness of the cultural loss as a result of their contact with other cultures, the selected folk songs and folk tales in the study of the

past ages give a vivid depiction of the everyday life of the Boroks, their attachment to land and nature and their belief systems.

The jhum cultivation which formed a base in their economic activity has always been at the center in most of their tales, and the Boroks' attitude towards nature and other non-human beings are also reflected in their folklore. Most of the Borok folk songs are celebration of the coming seasons, their traditional festivals, the everyday life of the common people and the beauty of their land and surrounding environment. Their folktales and folk songs reveal their creative mind and their psychological workings which are represented through stories and songs. Briefly, folklore includes the traditional elements of the way of life of a group of people and the creative expressions developing naturally as a part of this way of life. It portrays the generally held beliefs of members of the group and their activities resulting from these beliefs. For example, a ritual practice performed by the Boroks can be seen in a folktale named "The Ring that Speaks". In the story, the hero is seen having a magical ring that answers to all his commands. The hero, an orphan is adopted by one poor widow, a jhumia. The boy by using his magical ring gives everything needed by the widow: built her a 'tong ghar' (hut) in the jhum field, made her a 'langa' (basket) and also pay the 'Ochāi' drink and food to perform a worship to get a good harvest. The 'Ochāi' or 'Ojhāi' are the traditional priests that performed all tribal ceremonies and "get a small salary and portions of the offerings in return of their service" (Bhowmik 157). In the case of animal sacrifices, "they get a small fee from the worshippers for cutting the victim animals" (Bhowmik 157). The Ochāi apart from being a diviner also plays the role of the village physician. He treats certain diseases and "prescribes or applies folk medicine as a mode of treatment" (qtd. in Bhattacharjee 16). However, with the coming of Hinduism in the region, these traditional priests

are rarely employed to perform worship. With the Tripura rulers completely Aryanised and worshipping the Bengalee Hindu deities, most of the Hindu deities are also worshipped by their subjects. The result is that some Brahman priests (many of them are from Orissa, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Manipur, etc.) are employed and the Ochāis are left out as they “are not acquainted with the worship of the Hindu deities” (Bhowmik 157).

Many of the Kokborok folktales have a mention of the jhum field and the jhum cultivation as the people’s way of life. Characters found in many of their popular folktales – including “Kok-Ta-Sadi” (Do not Talk), “Chethuang”, “The Hornbill”, “Chachurat – The Rain”, “Chakbaimaya” and many others – are jhumias who earn their daily living by practicing jhum cultivation. The people, too, have an intimate relationship with the forest, hillocks, rivers, rain, trees, birds and animals. Many lore and tales came out as a result of their constant contact with their surrounding environment. They pay great respect to animals and their natural environment. For example, in the folktale “The Lazy Priest (Denga-Ochai)” we see an old widow advising her son not to kill any living species while setting fire to their jhum field:

Recite the hymns of God and Goddesses before you set the field to fire. Pray that you shall not be cursed if young ones of any species are burnt in the process as you are being compelled to set fire to the field and following the traditions of your forefathers. You have no intention to hurt or harm any living-beings. (Tyagi 56)

It has also been the common practice of the Boroks to perform certain rituals before selecting a plot of land for jhum cultivation, cutting and burning of the field. The Ochāi, too, performs a ritual before harvesting.

It is obvious that folklore encompasses the tradition-based activities of the various groups within the community. It is the self-description of the folk, a mirror that reflects the lived experiences and way of life of people of earlier times. In this connection, Alan Dundes calls folklore as an autobiographical ethnography:

For folklore is autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people’s own description of themselves. This is in contrast to other descriptions of that people, descriptions made by social workers, sociologists, political scientists or anthropologists. It may be that there is distortion in a people’s self image as it is expressed in that people’s songs, proverbs, and the like, but one must admit that there is often as much, if not more, distortion in the supposedly objective descriptions made by professional social scientists who in fact see the culture under study through the culturally relative and culturally determined categories of their own culture. Moreover, even the distortion in a people’s self image can tell the trained observer something about that people’s values. (55)

Postmodernists today pay great importance to the little narratives that appear in the form of poetry, fiction, folktales, folk songs and so on. Jean-Francois Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by provoking skepticism about universalising theories which he terms ‘grand narratives’ and other source of authoritarianism, argues against the possibility of justifying the narratives that bring together disciplines and social practices, such as science and culture; “the narratives we tell to justify a single set of laws and stakes are inherently unjust” (qtd. in Williams 211). Lyotard also argues that little narratives have become an appropriate way to explain and define social problems, social transformation and history of the people. The cultural assimilation of the Boroks by a vibrant Bengali Hindu culture starting with the discourse set out by the book

Rajmala that claimed legitimation by providing certain records regarding the history of the Tripura maharajas (kings). And there is no single [recognised] historical work that challenges the records and history provided by the *Rajmala*. Bhowmik, in his attempt to assign a probable date of the transformation from tribalism to Aryan faith believes, “The age of S’aivism as the probable date” (roughly eir 100 B. C.) for this transformation (41). However, all his facts and evidences are taken from the *Rajmala*. According to the *Rajmala*, the decedents of the Borok rulers are keen worshipers of lord Shiva; king Trilochandra who “belongs to the Puranic age (eir 500 B. C.) is also reported to have worshipped a number of Aryan Gods and Goddesses” (qtd. in Bhowmik 41). As a result, the Aryanisation or Sanskritisation process of the tribes of Tripura began, and the “royal family has all along declared themselves to be the Kshatriya race belonging to the lunar dynasty. . . [and] do not speak of any other origin” (40). It is, thus, problematic to assign the history provided by the *Rajmala* as a “false claim” of knowledge – in the term of Michel Foucault – to trace back the origin of the Borok tribe; however, one clear implication is that this hinduisation process has created a cultural assimilation of the Borok people. The Boroks while worshiping the fourteen deities and observing all Hindu festivals gradually abandoned their culture and stopped observing some of their cultural rituals. As a result, as mentioned earlier, the traditional priests or the Ochāis were less employed in their worship services. However, the case is somewhat different in some rural areas. It has to be borne in the mind that Gangacharan with his chompreng is a man hailing from the same cultural root, and hence this old yet living contact is not ruined in a time of violence and insurgency.

With the aggravation of this problem with the influx of the Bengali refugees before and after the Indian independence, domination of the strong Bengali culture has been intensified.

However, according to Misra, “at present conscious attempts are being made to retrieve the rich oral culture of the people which reflects the economic and social life of the communities” (xxvi). For example, the lost chompreng in the story “Gangacharan’s Chompreng” is one symbol that represents the long-lost cultural heritage of the Boroks. The protagonist, Rabichandra who is despondent being the victim of the ethnic conflicts has made all attempts to retain his father’s chompreng and play it under the moonlit night to console himself. Like most literature emerging out from the northeast region of India, the literature “that is taking shape in the Kokborok language . . . displays a self-confidence and a rootedness in the lived experiences of the people” (Misra xxvi). The contemporary Borok poets depict their attachment to their land and environment while displaying some folk elements in their poetry. They frequently give references to their oral tradition and through this they try to imbue a sense of identity to their readers and “attempt to recover a sense of home, identity, community and place in response to various forms of displacement caused by diverse forces” (Kharmawphlang 116). The contemporary fictions as discussed above are also a clear reflection of the contemporary social and political milieu. These little narratives of the Boroks thus stand against all stereotypes constructed on the Boroks and their culture as they clearly reflect the lived-experiences of the people. Fictional narrative allows a large space that cannot be found in historiography (that emphasises on data, facts, records, etc.) such as the lived experiences of the people, their worldviews, their reaction to certain events and incidents and the trauma they lived with.

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CHAPTER V:

CONCLUSION

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For the present dissertation, based on selected folktales, poems and short stories of Tripura, it is gradually realised that much of the Kokborok literature remains written in the Kokborok language, and most of it is yet to be translated in English for a wider readership. The selected folktales, poems and stories that are discussed and analysed in the previous chapters represent a wide variety of the Borok cultures, their belief systems and socio-political life, the enduring truth of their daily life and the creative imagination of the people. In them we find certain comments on the Tripura insurgency and its effects on the daily life of the common Borok people, their attachment to their land and other natural environment, the old tales and songs that embedded the social, economic and spiritual life of the Borok people.

The first chapter tries to present a synoptic view of Tripura history since its ancient eras; of its people and their cultural life. It has explained the problem for this study from one important perspective, the less known Kokborok literature is however given a serious reading in this study. Therefore, certain myths or misgivings with regard to Tripura and especially its literature are being busted in the process of the analysis. In this respect, the study has been a re-reading enterprise to enrich our knowledge of Kokborok literature.

The second chapter, that is, “Folklore as a Reflection of Culture” enlightens us on the dominant themes and characteristics of the rich Borok oral tradition and furthermore enunciates how the folk songs and folktales of the Borok people became intrinsic in understanding the cultural ethos and psychic life of the Borok people, especially of the past ages. What we learn from this

chapter is that the book, *Rajmala*, which is considered as the only surviving record of ancient Tripura history, while presenting in details the chronicles of Tripura Kings and their affairs with their neighbouring territories does not encompass the history and lived experiences of the common people, thus, leaving out the entire segment of the ethos and sentiments of the common people. However, an in-depth analysis of the Borok folklore reveals certain elements of their culture and tradition, their worldview and daily life. For example, most of their folktales have the jhum as their background; the life and daily activities of the characters are centered on the jhum and there are songs celebrating certain seasons and events; songs that express about their happiness in seeing the first crop, about the intimate relationship between young men and young women while working in the field, about the harvesting season and also about their sufferings and loss due to failure of their cultivation.

In one Borok folk song called “Jaduni or Sarbang” (Love since Childhood) we see how the adulthood life of the Borok people has been centered mainly on the jhum cultivation:

Since when grass had started to grow long ago

Both of us have been living intimately. . .

We children have grown up playingly (sic)

Now we have attained adulthood

You are an adult and I am too

It behaves us to work for our lively hood. . . (sic) (qtd. in Sutradhar 39)

Here the narrator declares that childhood life has been very easy, and most of their times have been spent at the house and courtyard playing games and roaming around in and near the village. From

then on, they have to face adult life and take certain responsibilities that includes working at the field and look after their families for their livelihood. As the economic life of the Boroks is mainly grounded on shifting cultivation or jhum cultivation, their whole life has been centered on the jhum field and the *gairings* (bamboo hut). Accordingly, most of their folk tales and folk songs are also centered on the jhum. According to Gupta, the practice of jhum is not, merely exercised by the tribals for their sustenance, but a traditional method of earning a livelihood, a traditional farming system that uses local product and techniques, has rooted in the past, has evolved to their present stage as a result of the interaction of the cultural and environmental condition of the region and is deeply embedded in the tribal psyche (47-50).

Certain moral aspects of the Borok belief system and rituals are also identified in their folktales. In one folktale called “The Lazy Priest (Denga-Ochai)” we see a lazy young man named Abhiram who is instructed by his widow mother to recite the hymns of god and goddesses before setting the jhum field to fire. She also tells him to pray so that he shall not be cursed if young ones of any species are burnt in the process of burning. However, Abhiram pays no heed to his mother’s advice and is being punished by nature at the end. Certain characteristics of the Borok’s indigenous belief system that are highly analogous to animistic belief can be found in their tales. As such, most of their tales have animal characters that speak the language of man and also behave in a human manner.

In this chapter, a compelling reason is felt as to re-reading the history as handed down to new generations, which required fresh investigation within a limited space of literature. From the perspective of the new historicists, a literary text may perhaps be regarded as a time-bound construction that is always in one way or another political; and “actively participates in the consolidation and/or construction of discourses and ideologies, just as it functions as an instrument

in the construction of identities, not only at the individual level – that of the subject – but also on the level of the group or even that of the national state. . . it is not simply a product of history, it also actively makes history” (Bertens 177). The history and lived experiences of the common Borok people that do not find its presence in the ancient book, the *Rajmala* remained subdued and ignored for a long time. However, the culture that was nurtured and developed in the rural areas that had close relationship with their natural surroundings and certain aspects of their cultural ethos are found in their little narratives that emerged from below in the form of songs and tales. These narratives thus may be regarded as a counter-narrative to the grandnarrative as provided by the *Rajmala*.

The contemporary literature of Kokborok in the form of poetry and fiction, on the other hand, bears certain elements of social reality and the experiences and plight of the common Borok people in the face of ethnic conflict, poor governance and corruption. The fourth chapter, “Contextualising Little Narratives of the Boroks”, brought to view some selected contemporary stories that may be regarded as a clear reflection of the contemporary social and political milieu. Like most writings from the northeast India, the Borok writers depict in their story the theme of insurgency, ethnic violence, corruption, memory, nationhood, the ecology of the region and the simplistic life of the common people. Two selected stories “Gangacharan’s Chompreng” by Debadrata Deb and “Basan’s Grandmother” by Bimal Sinha directly respond to the present socio-cultural scenario and the persistent conflicts in the state that affect the life of the common people. In “Gangacharan’s Chompreng”, we see the presence of dilemma in the minds of the people whether to take a violent or non-violent path in order to improve their impoverished condition. At one side we see Kamdar and his comrades who choose a more violent path and on the other side we see the protagonist Rabichandra who always cling to his peaceful attitude. The tragedy however

is that both of them suffered and are the victims of the conflict situation. The threat of their cultural identity and the sufferings of the innocent citizens during the unrest situation are also vividly depicted in these stories. A perfect example for this is the characters portrayed in both “Gangachanran’s Chompreng” and “Basan’s Grandmother” who have to earn their daily living by working as labourers at the road construction side and running a petty shop. Their daily sufferings and plight however are not represented in the mainstream discourse as there always have been a much higher ideological battles (the ethnic conflicts) that are taking place at time. The creative writings of the region, thus, become the one channel through which the issues of insurgency, the daily experiences and sufferings of the common people are communicated and expressed. In this connection, Homi Bhabha has rightly argued that world literature should be studied in terms of the historical trauma people have suffered – ‘a focus on. . . the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical past’ (12). Fictional narratives offer a wide spectrum of spaces to that are seemingly impossible in a non-fictional narrative.

However, it will be stereotypical to label the Kokborok literature as the literature of conflict since the writers of this region talk about many other issues apart from violence and conflict. The world at present is not aware of the existence of a rich folk literature of the Boroks. And the contemporary Borok poets depict in their poetry their close relationship with nature and have painted with their creative and imaginative brush of thoughts and words the beautiful landscape, the enchanting rivers, the mysterious hill ranges, the flora and fauna, the charming jhum field and other natural environment. It can be rightly said that their love for their land, their awareness to the loss of identity due to political forces in the modern times are the common bond of their poetic sensibility. As discussed in the third chapter, “Land as a Marker of Identity”, Borok poets like Nandakumar Debbarma, Chandrakanta Murasingh, Sudhanya Tripura, Shefali Debbarma and

other Borok poets all have a strong rootedness to their land; this is evident in their intimate relationship with the natural surroundings. For Nandakumar Debbarma, the rivers (Hwangho and the Mekong as particularly mentioned in his poem “House by the Riverside”) and hills (by specifically mentioning the Longtorai Hills) have something that holds some secrets of life which he wanted to be passed down to the new generation as these rivers and hills store memories of the poet, and so they are always a part of him which incessantly remind him of his past experiences. In the poems of Sudhanya Tripura, we see a vivid picture of the jhum field and the daily experiences of the jhumias, who are in constant contact with nature. In the poem, “And the Dream Bird”, Sudhanya subtly personified his desires and dreams as a dream bird that carries certain aspects of their culture and flies through ages. Her connection to nature and land is revealed by her continuous reference to the local flora and fauna like – the shoots of sprouting grains, the paddy plats, the medicinal roots and certain age-old stories of their forefathers. An in-depth analysis of these Kokborok poems, thus, reveals the Borok poets’ desires to represent their identity through depicting in their poems the intimate relationship between the Borok people and their natural environment. In this regard, Stuart Hall rightfully argues, “Our sense of place is really part of our cultural systems of meaning” and we “usually think and put or imagine cultures as ‘placed’. . . this helps to give shape and to give foundation to our identities” (186). Land acts as a potential generator of knowledges, discourses and experiences and a social topography that enacts various cultural assumptions.

Shefali Debbarma and Chandrakanta Murasingh, however, present another recurrent theme; a theme of awareness of the misrepresentation constructed by the mainstream discourse which they believe threatens their ethnic identity. Shefali in her poem “Lamination” by artistically juxtaposing two significant images – the traditional dress, *risa* and *pachhra*, and the laminated

identity card, grieves over the scheduled tribe card stereotyping the Borok identity. Murasingh, too, has the same feeling of frustration in the misrepresentation of the basic Borok identity as he juxtaposed in his poem, “As I Am”, the traditional Borok values with that of the modern values. This poem also reveals his sentiments that still cling on to the traditional Borok values and traditions.

Like Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih have defined poetry from northeast India as having a strong rootedness – “the roots of the beloved land; the roots of the people’s culture; the root of the times. . . the roots of the past” (xii) being sunken deep into their poetry, the contemporary Kokborok poetry apart from its artistic beauty reveals the deep desire of the Borok poets to reconstruct and redefine their identity. In other words, they portray stories yet untold and neglected for a long time. In this sense the little narratives of the Boroks which emerged in the form of folk tales, folk songs, poetry and fiction may be regarded as a chronicle of the history and lived experiences of the Borok people. These narratives being emerged from the folk itself, narrate the unspoken side of their history and experiences that are not found in any non-fictional literature. Their folk tales and folk songs are a counter-narrative to the *Rajmala*, as they bring to light the age-old cultural history and social life of the common Borok people. The oral tradition of Kokborok is very rich in the sense that it encompasses almost all significant aspects of their social, economic, psychological and spiritual life. The contemporary writings similarly depict certain enduring truths about their daily life in the midst of ethnic conflict, poor governance and corruption and through this they defy all stereotypical constructions on their identity and cultural history.

As the New Historicists justifiably say, the fictional writing or text has historicity as it is embedded in the social and cultural context, and history has a claim to textuality as we have no access to the full lived authentic past and only traces of it are preserved. The new historicists, thus,

treat creative writing not as a literature narrating stories and poetical expressions worthy of analysis but as a representation of historical forces. This modern school of literary criticism considers the social, cultural, historical, economic and political implications of the text. As the new historicists do not believe in the objective analysis of historical facts, and regarded history as a production of the prevailing ideology and discourse they try to deconstruct the traditional distinction between history and literature. Thus, they recommend a serious reading of literature as literature is another cultural artefact, even as history is, it can tell us something about the social life of the times, the *weltanschauung* of different ages and the *zeitgeist* of the times when they were written. The present study is not intended or claimed to establish a new history for the Boroks, though it has indicated certain orientations in creative writings in Tripura towards such aspirations. In this connection, the little narratives of the Boroks which sprang out from the folk itself may be regarded as a counter-narratives that challenge all kinds of stereotypes and misrepresentation provided by the mainstream literature.

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APPENDICES

NAME OF CANDIDATE	: Dustin Lalkulhpuia
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DEPARTMENT	: English
TITLE OF DISSERTATION	: <i>Little Narratives of the Boroks from Selected Folktales, Poems and Short Stories: A Study</i>
DATE OF PAYMENT OF ADMISSION (Commencement of First Semester)	: 05.08.2015
COMMENCEMENT OF SECOND SEMESTER/ DISSERTATION	: 1.1.2016
APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL –	
1. BOS	: 11. 4. 2016
2. SCHOOL BOARD	: 19. 4. 2016
3. REGISTRATION NO.& DATE	: MZU/M.Phil./303 of 19. 04. 2016
4. DUE DATE OF SUBMISSION	: 31.7.2017
5. EXTENTION IF ANY	: February, 2017- July, 2017

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X	Tripura Board of Secondary Education	2008	I	65%
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M.Phil.	Mizoram University	Course work completed in 2015	I 'A' Grade awarded. 10 pt. scale grading system, 'A' corresponds to 6-6.9 pts.	Corresponds to 69% in terms of percentage conversion.

M. Phil Regn. No and Date : MZU/M.Phil./303 of 19. 04. 2016

Other relevant informations :

- i) Currently working on M.Phil. dissertation entitled “*Little Narratives of the Boroks from Selected Folktales, Poems and Short Stories: A Study*” under the supervision of Prof. Sarangadhar Baral, Department of English, Mizoram University.
- ii) Awarded the “University Gold Medal” in the 11th Convocation of Mizoram University held in 2016.
- iii) Attended and participated in a national seminar entitled, “Emergent Identities: Its Literary Representations”, organised by the Department of English, Mizoram University under UGC-DRS-SAP I, on 4th – 6th March, 2016.
- iv) Attended and presented a paper titled ‘Fictional Narratives of the Boroks: A Study in Counter-Narrative’ in an international seminar entitled, ‘Indigeneity: Expression and Experience’ organised by the Department of English, Mizoram University under UGC-DRS-SAP I, on 25th and 26th February, 2016.
- v) Awarded the UGC-MZU Fellowship for the tenure of eighteen months from the date of admission on 28th July 2015.

ABSTRACT

**Little Narratives of the Boroks from Selected Folktales, Poems and
Short Stories: A Study**

Submitted by

Dustin Lalkulhpuia

Regn. No. MZU/M.Phil./303 of 19.04.2016

Supervisor

Prof. Sarangadhar Baral

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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2017

The state of Tripura is situated in the northeastern part of Indian sub-continent and is bordered by Bangladesh to the north, south and west, and the Indian states of Assam and Mizoram to the east. It is inhabited by 36.74 lakhs people (according to 2011 census) of which the Bengalis form the ethno-linguistic majority in Tripura. Around thirty percent of the population belongs to the indigenous communities, known in India as scheduled tribes. The original inhabitants of the land are known today as the Tripuris (geographically), the Twipras or the Boroks (racially). The Kokborok speaking community compriseses of eight main tribes, namely – Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Murasing, Koloi, Rupini and Uchoi. As these tribal communities use a common language called ‘Kokborok’ which is why, they are commonly known today as the ‘Boroks’ (Hoque 1). For information, the Kokborok language belongs to the Bodo-Garo group of Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan family. The term ‘Kokborok’ is in fact a compound of two main words viz. ‘Kok’ (language) and ‘Borok’ (human). So the combination of these words means ‘language of human being’. However, the second word is used to denote the Borok people.

The literature that sprang out in the State of Tripura has some unique characteristics. In this small state a variety of languages have developed, however, the Bengali, Manipuri and Kokborok literature are three major literatures that “have been continuing with age-old literary traditions; but till recently, the three literary streams had not mingled together” (Chaudhuri 18). A large number of writers in Tripura are bilinguals or multi-linguals; and the recent few decades saw the appearance of numerous translation works in the state. The Kokborok writings, in a written form, however, is comparatively new and the organised writings in Kokborok is believed to be dated around 1945; however what is lacked in the written literature is compensated by their rich oral tradition (19).

The present research is an attempt to study the selected folktales of the Boroks and the poems of contemporary Borok poets such as – Shefali Debbarma, Sudhanya Tripura, Chandrakanta Murasingh, Nandakumar Debbarma, as well as short story writers such as - Debabrata Deb, Bimal Singha and Haripada Debbarma. The central problem for the proposed study is to explore the little narratives of the Boroks in the face of existing grand narrative of the *Rajmala*, and to attempt at understanding their socio-political and historical life and experiences. The selected folktales in this study will throw light on the Borok ethos and identity. But, the contemporary Kokborok literary texts [as represented by the selected texts] express certain socio-cultural experiences which do not corroborate the settled and contented life of the early Boroks. However, the Boroks' love for their land and culture as available through these texts would testify to a continuous tradition of their thought and belief. So, the study proposes to examine their oral and literary expressions which may be regarded as their little narratives emerging from the below and telling their tales as yet marginalised and mostly unheard. These little narratives together may thus be taken as counter-narratives to other dominant narratives that stereotype the Borok identity, culture and history.

Postmodernists today pay great importance to the little narratives that appear in the form of poetry, fiction, folktales, folk songs and so on. Jean-Francois Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by provoking skepticism about universalising theories which he terms 'grand narratives' and other source of authoritarianism, argues against the possibility of justifying the narratives that bring together disciplines and social practices, such as science and culture; "the narratives we tell to justify a single set of laws and stakes are inherently unjust" (qtd. in Williams 211). Lyotard also argues that little narratives have become an appropriate way to explain and define social problems, social transformation and history of the people. Hence the

selection of creative writings and folklore are taken as a counter-narrative or ‘little narratives’ (a term coined by Lyotard) in this study. Creative writings, such as the ones selected in this study often portray the ethos, sentiments and ethnicity of certain tribes, that is often absent in non-creative writings, in this case the Borok tribe, which is otherwise referred to as rootedness.

The first chapter of the dissertation will present the historical and cultural background of the Borok tribe living in the state of Tripura and present their socio-political contexts for a fair analysis of the selected texts. It will also examine factors marginalising the Borok tribe in their homeland. For several centuries, the Tripuri dynasty ruled the area of modern Tripura. The independent Tripuri Kingdom (or Hill Tippera) joined the newly independent India on 15 October, 1949. Ethnic strife between the Borok people and the migrant Bengali population due to large influx of Bengali Hindu refugees and settlers from Bangladesh in the pre and post-Independence period led to tension and scattered violence since its integration into the India Union. The *Rajmala* (literally meaning the ‘Garland of Kings’) or ‘Chronicles of Tripura’ which was first written during the fifteenth century provides a chronicle of 179 kings from antiquity up to Krishna Kishore Manikya (1830-1850). The *Rajmala* is therefore believed to be the oldest book dealing with the history of ancient Tripura. The book was written in a verse form in Bengali, and was “in a detached form, but was collected and written in sequence by the Brahmin officials of Rajah Dharma Manikya, the 102nd Rajah” during the fifteenth century A.D. (Sandys 8). The Brahmin officials – Baneswer and Sukreswer were royal courtiers, and were patronised by the Rajah (king). Traditionally the royalty hailed from the Tripuri stock and ruled the region for many years; however, the *Rajmala* narrated the kings of Tripura as the ‘Kshatriyas’ and claimed them to be descendants of Druhyu, son of Yayati, of the Lunar Race. It depicted the forefathers of the Boroks as firm worshippers of the Hindu god, Siva (god of destruction). This

has become debatable and remains a matter of great interest to scholars and academicians. Manik Lal Reang articulates, “Some scholars questioned regarding the authenticity of this book and some others opined that no description of the life and condition of general common people of the state could be found in it” (v).

The history of Tripura may be classified into three major periods, namely – the Hindu Period that includes the records given by the *Rajmala*, the Mohamadan Period and the English Period. The Mohamadan Period includes the invasions of Tripura Kingdom by the Muhammadans since the thirteenth century onward. Although their rule never penetrated the hill regions; and as a result the traditional culture and life style of the indigenous people have been left intact and preserved in the rural areas (Hunter 118).

In past centuries, the Tripura Kingdom was at constant war and conflict with her neighbouring kingdoms and states. In the early fifteenth century (until 1515 A. D.) three successive Tripura kings settled thousands of Bengali-Hindu families in their kingdom. This particular era in the history also saw royal patronage of Bengali literature in Tripura. Hindu Brahmins settled in different parts of the state and the majority of the population embraced Hinduism, built temples and adopted Vaishnavism in 1470. Till today, the indigenous belief and practices are a synthesis of “indigenous animism and the ritualism of Bengali Hindus” (Debbarma 29).

During the British rule in India, Tripura became a princely state and the kings of Tripura had an estate in British India, popularly known as Tiperra District or Chakla Roshnabad (now the Comilla District of Bangladesh). The East India Company started collecting revenues from the Tripura plains, and as a result this created revolt among the indigenous tribes of Tripura on the issue of revenue collection. During the second half of the eighteenth century, the Tripura King’s

property was shrinking as the East India Company's demands for tax increased. Along with these came the British criminal and civil procedure code, which was deeply alien to the indigenous culture (Choudary 26).

The penultimate phase of the nineteenth century saw the enactment of the Tenancy Act in 1885-86, where the British gave their Bengali subjects tenancy rights at a very low cost to attract cultivation and boost revenue. A total of 30,000 hectares of additional plain land was settled (Chakraborty 36). Thus, the pressure on the land continued, and was further aggravated by the King's liberal donation of land to high caste Brahmins, Muslims and Government officials. The banning of *jhum* (shifting cultivation) in the forest areas in 1887 and the Jhumia Rehabilitation Scheme of 1889 attracted more non-tribals than tribals, taking more land away from the tribals (Bhattacharya 67). The various economic measures taken by the King (based on the British model) to increase his revenue, thus, enormously aggravated the problem of land scarcity for the tribals by the end of the nineteenth century.

The first half of the twentieth century saw further agitation due to the massive influx of non-tribals into Tripura, which was made possible through a settlement policy of the King. This heavy influx of migrants worsened the ethnic conflict in the State. As a consequence, a growing numbers of ethno-centric tribal parties mushroomed, with the 'Gana Muktiparishad', a Left Wing Tribal Party, in forefront. The failure of the government's efforts to restore the alienated tribal lands also created a sense of mistrust and betrayal among the indigenous community and led to the emergence of pro-tribal parties like the 'Tripura Upajati Juba Samity' (TUJS) in 1967 (Mohanta 60), 'Tripura National Volunteer (TNV)' and many other insurgent groups which later led to the 1980s communal riots between the indigenous tribes and the Bengalis. It can be assumed that the recent cyclic ethnic violence in Tripura is inevitable, if not intractable, in as

much as the ethnic minority is not given the sense of equity in the economic, social, political and psychological space by the majority group.

Emerging in the late twentieth century, the contemporary Kokborok poems and short stories have provided a vivid depiction of the contemporary social, economic, political and cultural life of the Borok people. The selected folktales, contemporary stories and poems represent a wide variety of the Borok culture, their belief systems and socio-political life, the enduring truth of their daily life and the creative imagination of the people. In these texts we find certain impacts of the Tripura insurgency in the daily life of the common people; their attachment to their land and other natural environment; the old tales and songs that embedded the social, economic and spiritual life of the Borok people. Like most writings from other writers of Northeast India like Robin S. Ngangom (Manipur), Kynpham S. Nongkynrih (Shillong), Temsula Ao (Nagaland) and others, the Borok writers depict in their stories and poems, the theme of insurgency, ethnic violence, identity, nationhood, corruption, memory, the ecology of the region and the simple everyday life of the common people.

In the second chapter entitled “Folklore as a Reflection of Culture” the study examines the Borok folk culture and oral tradition which is mainly based on the rural people practicing their rituals, customs and beliefs which are manifested in their tales, dances and songs. Most of the tales selected in this study have the *jhum* as their background and the life centered around this/their agricultural activities – be that of love, merry making, sadness, death, marriage and so on and so forth – have been discussed in their tales.

In one of the folk songs, “Goria Rwmani” (Onset Jhum) we see a clear picture of the *Garia* Festival celebrated by the Tripuris/Boroks for worshipping their chief deity, Garia. The Garia festival is celebrated in the opening month of the new year before the traditional jhum

cultivation starts. It is the season of merry making, feasting and dancing. The Garia festival which is observed between the last day of *Chaitra/Chaitor* (March-April) and the seventh day of *Vaisakha/Boisak* (end of April) is very important among the people. This season is then followed by the traditional jhum cultivation. We also see in the song that the *jhumias* have utilised their indigenous knowledge of sowing. For example, *garia* (*garu*) seed should be sown in the cold valley and the *mami* seed may be sown on the slope facing the east. Likewise, it is unwise to sow paddy seed with *garo* paddy seed as that will give an unfavourable result. A small bamboo hut, *gairing* has been set up in the field in which they can take their meal, rest for some time and watch the field and saved from some animals. The *gairing* or the jhum hut plays an important role in the Borok life and is like their second home. In a folktale called “Kok-Ta-Sadi” (Do Not Talk) we also see the jhumia and his wife go to the field for work during the agricultural season. As there are many works left to do in the field, they have to stay at the *gairing* for many days. Unfortunately, during their absence their two beautiful daughters are taken away by the royal armies to the palace. This tale also portrays the everyday activities of the people during the agricultural season. Usually men and women go to their jhum field during day time and the children and the old age remain at the house. However, when the work is intense the jhumias usually spent several days at their *gairing* as going and returning from the jhum field involve a lot of time to waste. This is the daily toil and daily life style of the people during the agricultural season.

In one Borok folk song called “Jaduni or Sarbang” (Love since Childhood) we see how the adulthood life of the Borok people has been centered mainly on the jhum. In the song, the narrator declares that childhood life has been very easy, and most of their times have been spent at the house and courtyard playing games and roaming around in and near the village. From then

on, they have to face adult life and take certain responsibilities that include working at the field and look after their families for their livelihood. As the economic life of the Boroks is mainly based on jhum cultivation, their whole life has been centered on the jhum field and the gairings. Accordingly, most of their folk tales and folk songs are also centered on the jhum.

It is to be noted here that the primary aim of the Borok tales is to give enjoyment and pleasure to the hearers, especially to children. According to Gan-Chaudhuri one of the main instruments that constitutes the Borok folktales is social control (480). Like many tales in different countries, the Borok folktales encourage reward and punishment. The folktale named “The Two Girls” conveys a moral lesson which everyone can learn: person with good nature and a kind heart will always find many good things in life; and the punishment for wicked person is death. It also conveys the message that even the obstacles are hard to overcome, the righteous and honest person will always triumph in the end. To quote Jadav, folktale acts as a driving force for “holding up to scorn those who depart from socially accepted norms, and eulogizing those who follow them, exemplifying the standard-bearers of values and goals of the community” (28) apart from suggesting rules for conduct.

Thus, folktales are such works of art that are not chronicle of facts; and are stories that are placed in a timeless setting. They are stories that evolved through time and emerged from the common people; it is a medium through which they expressed their desires and creative thinking. As a result, “these tales may guide us to the remote unknown past of these people” (the Boroks) and are also “documents of the rich imaginations and intrinsic artistic skill of these ancient people even in that far-off age” (Murasingh 283). In the articulation of Alan Dundes, a renowned ethnographer and folklorist, the same idea comes vibrant:

For folklore is autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people’s own description of themselves. This is in contrast to other descriptions of that people, descriptions made by social workers, sociologists, political scientists or anthropologists. It may be that there is distortion in a people’s self image as it is expressed in that people’s songs, proverbs, and the like, but one must admit that there is often as much, if not more, distortion in the supposedly objective descriptions made by professional social scientists who in fact see the culture under study through the culturally relative and culturally determined categories of their own culture. Moreover, even the distortion in a people’s self image can tell the trained observer something about that people’s values. (55)

This study could underline a fact that, historically the kings of Tripura depended on the common mass only for collecting revenue and ironically left them to fend for themselves. So, over the years in Tripura, there emerged two streams of literature— one stream is characterised by the accounts of the kings of illustrious pre-historic ‘lunar dynasty’ as presented in the book *Rajmala*, and the other stream developed isolatedly in the folk language of the Boroks which remained predominantly oral. The early Kokborok oral literature further bloomed into stories, songs and proverbs that actually describe the everyday experiences of the people; their socio-economic life, their sufferings and plight, which are treated as the little narratives for this study.

The third chapter “Land as a Marker of Identity” explores how land and identity (even ethnicity) are closely related, and the interrelationship evolves deepening men’s solidarity and realisation of meaningful pursuits. We often define ourselves, our identities in terms of the place we dwell in. Ordinarily, land and place is considered as static and fixed entity, but, it can be conceived as mobile, changing and hybrid spatiality which has been critically developed during the recent decades by postmodern thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, Edward W. Soja and others. In

The Production of Space, Lefebvre theorises land or space by defining it as encompassing more than material, physical, space, although without eliminating it. Both objective and subjective, it is the space we practically produce and then perceive and experience with our senses (12). Land also acts as a potential generator of knowledge, discourses and experiences and also as social topography that creates and enacts various cultural assumptions. For this reason land and nature very often make their appearances in poems and creative writings of the in-dwelling people.

This chapter undertakes to study the Kokborok poems in translation which give us fine representations of the land and landscape and its relationship with the common Borok people. The Borok poets, who mainly write in their native Kokborok language, have a strong rootedness to their land. The Borok people are deeply attached to their land, hills and rivers, which the poets often celebrated in their poems. For example, in an expressly romantic Kokborok lyrics “A House by the Riverside”, Nandakumar Debbarma has subtly expressed the contrast between human proneness to death and the rivers perennial flow. In this it is subtly implied that the collective sufferings of the people remembered over changing times will work as a new landmark of identity for the next generations. It also means the memory of collective experiences such as – death, murder and trauma of the past and history would historically be usable as marker of identity for the people. Postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha, too, postulates that world literature should be studied in terms of the historical trauma people have suffered – “a focus on . . . the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical past” (12).

In this poem, Nandakumar also portrays the people’s close relationship with nature and land. He specifically mentioned certain rivers like – Hwangho, Mekong and the Gomatee and portrays them as a metaphor of the land inhabited by his people. For him, these rivers and hills

have something that holds some secrets of life which he wanted to be passed down to the new generation. Here, what is evident is that these rivers and hills store the poet's memories and are a constant reminder of his past experiences.

Sudhanya Tripura, too, reflects in his poetry the life and experiences of the people – mainly the *jhumias* – in some of his poems like – the “Woo-Wang” where a vivid picture of the jhum field and the stilt-house can be found; the “Mad Pipers” which describes the daily experiences of a mad piper “keeping the fishing net / on the bank” (300) of a river while playing his flute, with a brief and colourful description of the natural surroundings as a background; and the “Displaced Heart” which portrays the life of the rural people and their daily sufferings and experiences. Sudhanya's deep aspiration for retaining his cultural heritage can clearly be seen in most of his poems. For instance, in his most-celebrated poem “And the Dream Bird” he subtly projects his deep desire to pass down the rich heritage of Borok culture and tradition to the coming generation through writing. Here, the poet's desires and dreams have been personified as a “dream bird” that carries certain aspects of Borok culture and flies through ages.

Thus, it is stereotypical to imagine emerging literature from Tripura as dealing only with the insurgency, trauma and ethnic conflicts. On the other hand, nature and land form a major theme in the early Kokborok poetry as well as shape the Borok myths and folktales.

Another recurring theme that may be found in the poems of the contemporary Borok poets is the theme of awareness to the misrepresentation constructed by the mainstream discourse that threatens their ethnic identity and also the present socio-economic factors that led to their marginalisation and sufferings in their daily life. For example, Shefali Debbarma in her poem “Lamination”, grieves over the Scheduled Tribe card stereotyping the Borok identity. In this poem Shefali had used significant images of *risa* and *pachhra*, the traditional Borok dress,

against a laminated identity card thrust upon them by the government. This juxtaposition of the Borok traditional dress and the laminated identity card used by the government is highly significant in the sense that both represent a discourse on culture from different perspectives: the *risa* and the *pachhra* represent anything that signifies the culture and tradition of the Boroks, on the other hand, the government paper signifies the mainstream discourse or the fixed identity thrust upon by the government. The outcome of these two things placed together inside the *khuturuk* after a century years is that the *risa* and *pachhra* have worn out and turning into shreds but the laminated S. T. Card remains intact. This exposes how vulnerable people's culture can be when it has not been appreciated in use by the dominant culture which understands the official representation framed and laminated.

The Borok folk songs and the contemporary poems both share their similarity in depicting the intimate relationship between man and nature. The Borok folktales and folk songs celebrated life and nature whereas the contemporary Borok poets, apart from depicting the attachment of the Borok people to their land and nature, are also focused on the social and political milieu of the present which would attest the continuity of the imaginative and intellectual bond with their land. There are poets like – Chandrakanta Murasingh who being a witness to the agonies of contemporary Tripura, is continuously seeking for the reclamation of the Borok identity by implanting the rich cultural heritage by depicting the typical Tripuri landscape and the natural surroundings into the people's mind through his poetry.

The contemporary Kokborok fictions are very few in number to find, but the texts selected in this study may be taken as a literary sample in measuring the contemporary socio-political life of the Boroks. The fourth chapter "Contextualising Little Narratives of the Boroks" brought to view some selected contemporary stories that may be regarded as a clear reflection of

the contemporary social and political milieu. Like several writings from the northeast India, the Borok writers depict in their story the theme of insurgency, ethnic violence, corruption, memory, nationhood, the ecology of the region and the simple life of the common people, and in this case their stories serve as a tool in depicting the lived-experiences of the Borok tribe.

In his short story “Gangacharan’s Chompreng”, a Borok writer Debabrata Deb has tried to respond to the present socio-cultural conflicts that affect the life of the Boroks in general. In the story, the “Chompreng” – a traditional musical instrument of the Boroks – signifies anything that represents the rich cultural heritage of the people, and also signifies any medium through which a going-back-to-the-old times can be made possible by continuously invoking the muse that inspired their ancestors. This theme of rootedness is one of the most popular themes that can be found in the writings of the Northeastern writers. Instead of being continuously cajoled by his friend Kamdar and his comrades to join the insurgent group, Rabichandra still desires to follow a non-violent path in order to improve his condition. He continuously strives for a peaceful coexistence, as symbolised by his continuous seeking for his father’s musical instrument, the chompreng. This reveals the dilemma in the minds of the Borok people. The story juxtaposes contrasting characters like Kamdar and Abhiram who by any means try to preserve their land and identity through violent ways, and Rabichandra who in order to get back to their root takes a peaceful path. However, the concluding part of the story reveals that Rabichandra is uncertain of his son, who as the story depicts, is likely to follow a more violent path like Kamdar and his friends. This can be understood not merely in relation to the new generation’s leaning towards armed rebellion, but also to the continuous and unending deprivation and marginalisation faced by the Boroks, which seemed a compelling reason for adapting violent means. In the story “Basan’s Grandmother”, Bimal Singha artistically conveys his message to the people about the

futility of ethnic conflict while vividly portraying the conflicts and clashes between the tribals and non-tribals during the 1980s.

The threat of their cultural identity and the sufferings of the innocent citizens during the conflict situation are also vividly depicted in the selected stories. A perfect example for this is the characters portrayed in both “Gangachanran’s Chompreng” and “Basan’s Grandmother” who have to earn their daily living by working as labourers at the road construction side and running a petty shop. Their daily sufferings and plight however are not represented in the mainstream discourse as there always have been much higher ideological battles focused on the ethnic conflicts that are taking place at time. The creative writings of the region, thus, become the one channel through which the issues of insurgency, the daily experiences and sufferings of the common people are communicated and expressed. For Homi K. Bhabha the world literature should be studied in terms of the historical trauma people have suffered – ‘a focus on. . . the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical past’ (12). Fictional narratives thus offer a wide spectrum of representation that is seemingly impossible in a non-fictional narrative.

As the New Historicists believed, the fictional writing or text has historicity as it is embedded in the social and cultural context, and history has a claim to textuality since we have no access to the full lived authentic past and only traces of it are preserved. New Historicism treats a work of literature not as a story worthy of analysing the artistic beauty but also as a representation of historical forces. This modern school of literary criticism considers the social, cultural, historical, economic and political implications of the text. Stephen Greenblatt defines New Historicism as “a shift away from a criticism centered on ‘verbal icons’ toward a criticism centered on cultural artifacts” (3). He also says that both the historical and the literary have a

mutually beneficial role and recommends for a parallel reading of the literary and non-literary texts of the same historical period.

The concluding chapter sums up the various aspects and critical views explored in the previous chapters and also deals with the findings of the study. A comparative study of the Borok folklores and the contemporary stories and poems brought to light a shift in literary and creative appreciation of culture and identity in the contemporary Borok narratives. The selected folk songs and folk tales in the study give a vivid depiction of the everyday life of the Boroks, their attachment to land and Nature and their belief systems. The jhum cultivation which formed a basis in their economic activity has always been at the center in most of their tales, and the Boroks' attitude towards Nature and other non-human beings are also reflected in their folklore. Most of the Borok folk songs are celebration of the coming seasons, their traditional festivals, the everyday life of the common people and the beauty of their land and surrounding environment. On the other hand, the emerging Borok writers depict in their poems and stories the contemporary social problems, and present their own views and perceptions while presenting their rich cultural values and experiences. They depict in their stories and poems the continuous sufferings of the people amidst the socio-economic and political problems, their experiences of violence perpetrated by various militant outfits and also that of the government counter-insurgency operations. The theme of rootedness and their sense of awareness of the cultural loss as a result of their contact with other cultures, their attempts to recover their cultural heritage and identity by frequently referring to their myths and folklore and their attempt to retrieve their rich oral tradition remain the dominant theme in their writings. Through their writings, the contemporary Borok writers attempt to make conscious efforts to retrieve their rich oral tradition which reflects the economic and social life of the people (Misra xxviii).

The contemporary Kokborok poetry apart from its artistic beauty reveals the deep desire of the Borok poets to reconstruct and redefine their identity. In other words, they portray stories yet untold and neglected for a long time. In this sense, the little narratives of the Boroks which emerged in the form of folk tales, folk songs, poetry and fiction may be regarded as chronicle of the history and lived experiences of the Borok people. These narratives being emerged from the folk itself, narrate the unspoken side of their history and experiences that are not found in any non-fictional literature. Their folk tales and folk songs are counter-narratives to the *Rajmala* as they bring to light the age-old cultural history and social life of the common Borok people. The oral tradition of Kokborok is very rich in the sense that it encompasses almost all significant aspects of their social, economic, psychological and spiritual life. The contemporary writings similarly depict certain enduring truths about their daily life in the midst of ethnic conflict, poor governance and corruption and through this they defy all stereotypical constructions on their identity and cultural history.

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