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Language, power, and the erasure of Kol

A group of young Kol boys standing in front of a vibrant traditional mural.

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To explore the future of linguistic diversity in Bangladesh from the perspective of the Kol language, I begin by revisiting a few unconventional yet academically sound facts about the Kol people. Such a discussion is necessary not only to correct persistent misrecognitions but also to situate the Kol within broader historical and linguistic debates. From there, I turn to the voices of the Kol community themselves, who speak of an ongoing shift in their language, culture, livelihood, and heritage. This situation of language endangerment raises fundamental concerns about the multilingual future that Bangladesh aspires to build.

Kol is an endonym that refers to the Kol people, their land, culture, and language in both India and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, the Kols are a marginal community among the indigenous peoples of the plains. While the origin of the language is not clearly known to Kol speakers themselves, various explanations of its probable origins have been proposed by linguists and anthropologists. Linguistically, Kol is an endangered language belonging to the Munda family. It is spoken in north-western Bangladesh and shares significant similarities with other Munda languages spoken in India. Kol is the primary language, or mother tongue, of the Kol indigenous community, which possesses its own distinct linguistic and cultural identity. However, many Kol people today express concern about losing their mother tongue and native traditions.

Currently, among Kol speakers, there is an increasing trend of borrowing words from other languages. The influence of Santali and Bangla is particularly noticeable. Kol speakers reside in several districts of Bangladesh, including Rajshahi, Chapai Nawabganj, Naogaon, Rangpur, Dinajpur, and Kushtia. More specifically, they are concentrated in Chapai Nawabganj (Sadar and Gomastapur), Rajshahi (Godagari and Sadar), and Dinajpur (Kotwali and Kahorol). According to the 2022 Population and Housing Census of Bangladesh, the ethnic Kol population stands at 3,822, of whom 1,842 are male and 1,980 are female.

At the same time, it is important to address a larger issue of naming and representation. In the plains of Bangladesh and eastern India, many indigenous communities are today homogenised under the generalised ethnolinguistic label 'Santali'. This classificatory reduction overlooks the internal diversity of Munda-speaking populations and reproduces a long-standing simplification rooted in colonial knowledge production. While contemporary administrative and public discourse often collapses multiple identities into 'Santali', earlier scholarship used a different umbrella term, 'Kol'. Although that label also carried colonial baggage, it reflected a broader recognition of a Munda linguistic-cultural cluster rather than a single dominant identity.

The shift from 'Kol' to 'Santali' is not merely terminological; it denotes changing regimes of representation, power, and visibility. Naming practices are political acts, as they determine which languages are recognised, which identities are institutionalised, and which communities become statistically invisible. From a decolonial perspective, the uncritical use of homogenising umbrella terms—whether 'Kol' in colonial archives or 'Santali' in contemporary bureaucratic discourse—constitutes an epistemic act that marginalises smaller Munda-speaking groups and erases localised linguistic ecologies.

Importantly, discussions of the Kol language tradition also bring forward a bold and alternative origin narrative of Bangla that foregrounds the historical and structural affinities between Bangla and the Kol–Munda language continuum. In 1977, anthropologist Clarence Maloney revisited conventional views on the evolution of Bengali. While acknowledging the widespread belief that Bengali was derived from Sanskrit, he argued that Sanskrit functioned primarily as a liturgical and literary language that enriched Bangla rather than serving as its direct ancestor. Engaging with G. A. Grierson's outer-band theory, Maloney argued that structural differences among Bengali, Marathi, and other languages complicated the idea of a single Magadhan Prakrita origin. Significantly, he proposed that Bengali may have developed as a pidgin on the Bengal plain through processes of Munda contact and pidginisation. Similarly, prominent linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji acknowledged Kol (or Munda) influences in Bengali, identifying numerous words in modern Bangla—such as kadali, kambala, mayura, tambula, utpala, mera, and meni—as being of Kol origin. Reinforcing this line of inquiry, distinguished linguist Muhammad Shahidullah presented his influential paper 'Munda Affinities of Bengali', published in 1931. He demonstrated phonological, morphological, syntactical, and lexical connections between Bengali and Munda languages and concluded that the relationship between Bengali and Kol was intimate.

Beyond academic arguments, Kol remains a rich repository of folklore, song, rhyme, and religious literature within the Munda language family. In recent times, the Roman script has been used to write Kol, often with special diacritic markers. Kol speakers are fluently multilingual, typically using Santali and Bangla alongside their mother tongue. While Kol is used primarily within the community, Bangla dominates outside their villages. The influence of Munda languages on Bangla is visible in vocabulary related to agriculture, habitation, kinship, counting, and the natural world. Words such as ku i (twenty), pet (belly), cʰula (oven), and dʰol (drum) are recognised as

deshi words of indigenous origin. Thus, Kol is not peripheral to the linguistic history of this region. It is foundational.

However, the future of Kol remains fragile. According to Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), Kol remains between level 6 and level 7, indicating a precarious state of intergenerational transmission. Field observations suggest that level 7 is increasingly applicable: while the child-bearing generation can speak the language, transmission to children is weakening. Under the Expanded GIDS (EGIDS), Kol is moving from 'vulnerable' (6a) towards 'threatened' (6b). Recent fieldwork indicates that it is already in a threatened state, as the youngest generation is gradually losing fluency in their mother tongue.

The situation of the Kol language in Bangladesh cannot be understood merely as a case of gradual linguistic decline. Rather, it must be situated within broader theoretical discussions of language endangerment as a political and historically structured process. Recent arguments in linguistics claim that language endangerment is not a 'natural' outcome of linguistic evolution but a consequence of power, inequality, and colonial history. This consideration

Filming an interview with Kol girls, recorded by a member of the Kol community.

is particularly relevant to the Kol case.

Language endangerment occurs when intergenerational transmission weakens or ceases. In the Kol context, field observations indicate precisely such a precarious condition: while older generations speak Kol fluently, younger generations increasingly shift towards Bangla and, in some cases, Santali. This pattern reflects what sociolinguists describe as language shift, where a community gradually abandons its ancestral language in favour of a dominant one. However, as theorists such as Roche and Belew cautioned in 2025, such shifts are rarely voluntary or 'natural'. They are embedded in systems of linguistic inequality.

In Bangladesh, Bangla occupies a position of state prestige, educational dominance, and economic mobility. Santali, in certain contexts, also functions as a more numerically and institutionally recognised Munda language. Within this hierarchy, Kol becomes doubly marginalised: first by national linguistic centralisation around Bangla, and second by homogenising

classifications that subsume smaller Munda-speaking groups under 'Santali'. As a result, Kol speakers often adopt dominant languages for education, employment, and social acceptance. This mirrors Roche and Belew's argument that language endangerment emerges through political domination, linguistic marginalisation, and cultural assimilation. Importantly, the erasure of the name 'Kol' itself through shifting classificatory regimes illustrates how naming practices function as acts of power. When a language becomes statistically invisible, it becomes politically invisible. Thus, Kol endangerment is not simply about vocabulary loss or borrowing; it is about unequal recognition within state and knowledge systems.

In this contemporary phase, we now need to reconceptualise language revitalisation as a form of resistance and decolonisation. In the Kol context, documentation, community-based language teaching, and the assertion of Kol as an endonym are not merely academic exercises. They are acts of epistemic reclamation. Recording oral literature, transcribing narratives in Roman script with diacritic markers, and analysing Kol's structural features are steps towards restoring intergenerational transmission and community dignity. Under Fishman's GIDS and the Expanded GIDS framework, Kol currently falls within the vulnerable-to-threatened range, signalling a fragile stage of transmission. Therefore, language documentation is necessary, and revitalisation must be community-driven. Without active participation from Kol speakers themselves, especially the younger generation, documentation alone cannot secure survival.

Ultimately, the future of linguistic diversity in Bangladesh depends on whether languages like Kol are recognised not as relics of the past but as living systems shaped by historical contact, colonial intervention, and contemporary inequality. Bangladesh's history is inseparable from the struggle for language rights. International Mother Language Day reminds us of that legacy each year. The question, therefore, is not whether Kol will survive on its own. The question is whether Bangladesh is prepared to imagine a multilingual future that includes its endangered indigenous voices. I have often searched for this answer in my interactions with a Kol child named Aranya Biraj Kol, who now creates small online videos in his own language along with his father. At times, the answer remains unspoken in the quiet gaze of Rumali Hasda Kol, a Kol woman recently displaced from her ancestral homestead. If we can confront these existential questions beyond the month of February and beyond ceremonial remembrance, of course, we may finally begin to find answers to issues that are intricate, essential, and profoundly human.

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WILL THE NEXT GENERATION SPEAK KOKBOROK?

S. DISHA

In a small village of Khagrachhari, a grandmother calls her grandson to dinner in Kokborok. Her voice carries the warmth of generations and is filled with the words she learned from her own mother. But the boy replies in the Chakma language. He understands her, yet he hesitates to answer in his mother tongue. The language that once flowed naturally at home now struggles to survive even within its own walls. Such moments have become very common across Tripura communities in Khagrachhari, Rangamati, and parts of Cumilla. The once-prominent language of this indigenous community is now slowly fading away with each generation.

Kokborok, which literally means "language of the people," belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family and is spoken by the Tripura community of India and the border regions of Bangladesh, mainly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and nearby areas. For generations, it has survived as a community language with limited written use, carrying the history, culture, and identity of its people. However, today, Kokborok stands at a critical stage where its survival faces serious challenges.

At present, Kokborok has very limited written and literary development in Bangladesh. Unlike some neighbouring regions, such as India, there is little formal grammar documentation, textbooks, literature, or standard learning materials. Most communication remains oral. It does not yet have a standardised written form. In addition, the language lacks sufficient literary resources. While some poems and short stories exist in Kokborok, the available body of literature is still too limited to support the language's growth effectively. The community launched its first Kokborok book in Bangladesh only as recently as 2022. Nikke Tripura, a community member, shared, "Our language is mostly oral, and we still

Three first-grade students from the Tripura community pore over a Kokborok textbook. The photograph was taken at Doluchhora Government Primary School in Sreemangal upazila, Moulvibazar. Photo: Mintu Deshwara.

lack a proper written form in Bangladesh. Some people use Roman letters, and India has developed a writing system, but now the government and community are working together to develop one."

Schools mostly use Bangla and English as the mediums of instruction. As a result, children grow up prioritising these dominant languages rather than their mother tongue. In multicultural school environments, some even adopt other indigenous languages, such as Chakma, due to environmental influences. Barna Tripura, a university student in Dhaka, shared that by growing up surrounded by Chakma families, she gained the ability to speak that language more comfortably than Kokborok. She explained, "Most of my friends spoke Chakma, and school used Bangla, so I naturally learned those languages. My family rarely used Kokborok at home. My parents were working parents, and my mother does

not even know proper Kokborok. Therefore, I never really learned it. Only my aunt in my family knows Kokborok."

However, recognising the vulnerable condition of this language, the government initiated the teaching of Kokborok in community schools in 2017. Still, the results have not been satisfactory due to inadequate teacher training and the limited economic value associated with the language. Mathura Bikash Tripura, Executive Director of Zabarang Kalyan Samity, explained, "Although children are now being taught Kokborok in schools, the outcome remains disappointing." He also added, "The younger generation has little interest in learning their mother tongue because it offers fewer economic benefits in terms of employment or educational opportunities."

Future of the language

The future of Kokborok in Bangladesh

appears uncertain and fragile. Although the language is not yet extinct, it is clearly moving towards endangerment. Without immediate efforts to increase daily use, proper documentation, and sustained institutional support, Kokborok may gradually disappear under the pressure of dominant languages such as Bangla, Chakma, and Marma.

Dr Md Mostafa Rashel, Associate Professor of Linguistics at BUP, shared that Kokborok is already in a vulnerable state. According to him, "The language is not yet fully endangered, but it is clearly moving in that direction. Due to the strong influence of Chakma, Marma, and Bangla, community members are no longer able to use Kokborok regularly. As Chakma, Marma, and Bangla become more common in daily communication, many original Kokborok words are slowly being forgotten. The younger generation, especially children, is not fully acquiring these traditional words, which leads to a gradual loss of vocabulary and cultural knowledge. Our current focus is to document the language so that it does not vanish completely."

Urbanisation has added another layer of difficulty. Mathura Bikash Tripura, Executive Director of Zabarang Kalyan Samity, shared, "Many young Tripura people who move to towns or cities feel embarrassed to speak Kokborok in public. Even when they use it, they often mix it with Bangla or English. This code-mixing weakens the purity of the language and reflects a declining sense of linguistic pride among the youth. Some people still value their mother tongue, but unless this attitude changes among the younger generation, the future of Kokborok remains uncertain. We are trying to increase engagement with them, but the results are not yet satisfactory."

There is still hope, as small efforts are beginning across villages and community schools, such as local classes, children's books, and cultural programmes. Linguists

and activists believe that if Kokborok is taught in schools, used at home, and supported through digital media and literature, it can survive and even grow again.

Impact of technologies

At present, technology has had a limited impact on Kokborok in Bangladesh, but it is beginning to open new possibilities for the language. Some digital tools, as well as expanding online content and e-books, could support the preservation and learning of the language through documentation alongside traditional methods, although such initiatives remain in the early stages. Dr Md Mostafa Rashel shared, "Tools like Google Translate are now available. It can detect and translate Kokborok. Although the translations are not fully accurate, they provide a starting point for making the language more accessible and for supporting learning."

For Kokborok, survival is not just about words on a page or lessons in a classroom. It lives in conversations at home, the songs sung in villages, and the stories passed from grandparents to children. Yet today, those voices are fragile, and the language is slipping into the shadows of Bangla, Chakma, and English. Documentation and tools such as books or apps can help, but they cannot replace daily use and practice. Kokborok will thrive only if the next generation chooses to speak it, share it, and carry it forward as a living part of their identity. When a language disappears, it is not only words that are lost; it is stories, songs, history, and a people's way of seeing the world. Saving a language is more than preservation. Saving Kokborok means preserving the voice of the Tripura community itself.

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