

# Migration to Tripura: Impact on patterns of language distribution and linguistic diversity of Tripura, India

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## Abstract

*The paper explores the remarkable changes in language distribution and linguistic diversity in Tripura that were consequent upon refugee resettlement in the state in the post-independence period based on data from the Census of India in 2011. Percentage share and Greenberg's (1956) Monolingual non-weighted method has been used to analyse the data. Tripura exhibits moderate language diversity at the aggregate level, with Bengali as the linguistic majority and several minorities. The plains dominantly inhabited by the Non-tribes have lower language diversity due to urbanisation, large-scale centralised cultures, etc. In contrast, the hills inhabited by the tribes exhibit higher language diversity due to isolation, varied physiography, etc. The decline in linguistic diversity in Tripura is associated with the recent dominance of the Bengali language.*

**Keywords:** *Language diversity; language minority; language dominance; regional languages; migration*

## Introduction

Large-scale population redistribution in India and Pakistan soon after the partition is well documented. Substantial immigration from the erstwhile East Pakistan to the present Tripura state of the Indian Union started in the 1940s. It continued right up to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 and post-Bangladesh liberation, both on an ongoing basis and with a sudden spurt during periods of particular communal unrest due to the proximity between the two regions and due to historical and political reasons. Initially, the refugees were rehabilitated along the international border and in accessible plain areas where the tribes were sparsely distributed. Later, the numbers increased and surpassed the host populace and were rehabilitated in the interiors,

bringing the immigrants face-to-face with the tribes. The redistribution brought about unprecedented changes in the demographic structure and ethnic mix of the population and, subsequently, to Tripura's ethnic and linguistic composition and diversity. The once widely distributed and widely spoken languages of the indigenous people were replaced by the dominant Bengali language. Consequently, the languages spoken by the tribes not only turned 'minority' but were subjected to spatial shift and squeezing into the hills, the areas of their traditional habitats leading to a decline in the extent of linguistic diversity once far more widespread across the state. The migration of the Bengali population too undermined the functional importance

of tribal languages leading to language change in many areas and there was a surge in the rise of incidence of bilingualism, multilingualism, language loss and language shift of the tribal languages. This paper explores the impact of refugee resettlement on the redistribution of population on ethnic lines and the consequences of this process on language, particularly those spoken by the minority tribal groups of Tripura. The study brings out the geographical dimension of the distribution of different language speakers, which can serve as the basis for language policy implementations, help in language planning, and take appropriate measures to maintain the minority languages from the prospect of shift, change and death.

The paper is broadly divided into three parts. The first part covers the distribution pattern of tribes and non-tribes and their languages. The second part covers linguistic regionalisation based on the dominant concentration of languages. The third part covers the patterns of linguistic diversity in the different linguistic regions.

### **Literature review**

The literature on the present research topic can be divided into three parts. The first part covers linguistic diversity. The second part covers the distribution of tribes. The third part deals with language maintenance and language shift.

### ***Linguistic diversity***

Harmon (1996) defined linguistic diversity as the presence of diverse and distinct languages spoken in a particular geographical area or the world as a whole. Harmon and Loh (2010) combined language richness with language evenness. According to them, language richness is the number of languages, whereas

language evenness is the relative distribution of individual mother-tongue speakers among languages in a given area.

### ***Distribution of tribes***

Subbarao (1958) and Bhukya (2008) correlated the spatial distribution of the tribes in India with the inaccessible and isolated hills and forested areas. The distribution of tribes in Tripura fits admirably with this pattern found elsewhere in the country. However, the tribes in Tripura were not absent in the plains. Mackenzie (2011) mentions the tribes living in the plains as early as 1808. Coxhead, the political agent of Tripura, in the administrative report for 1875-1876 compiled by Chaudhuri (1996), also mentions that the tribes were residing in plain areas too. Sarma (1993) ascribes their concentration in the hilly areas to gradual displacement into the forest, hills and more inaccessible areas when the fresh migrants into the land overpowered them. He, however, acknowledges that this spatial dichotomy in the distribution of the tribes and the migrant people at least played a significant role in preserving and retaining the indigenous language and culture of the tribes. This redistribution process, while squeezing the tribes into much smaller territories, mainly into the forested hilly tracts, enabled the tribes to maintain linguistic diversity without being assimilated into the migrants' language and culture.

### ***Language maintenance and language shift***

It is vital in this context that the maintenance of language diversity in small and isolated populations is increasingly becoming difficult due to increasing contact between distinctive cultures. UNESCO, in 2010, reported that as many as 170 languages are endangered

in India, over half of which belong to the Tibeto-Burman language of Northeast India (Blackburn & Opgenort, 2010). In northeast India, the Tibeto-Burman languages are mainly spoken by the tribes. The process of language change and shift threatening their complete assimilation to the dominant regional languages is not only confined to Tibeto-Burman language speakers; the central Indian tribes too, are undergoing a similar process of losing their languages. Prasad (1992) in a study of Chhotanagpur tribes found that only the tribal core areas display higher linguistic diversity. In contrast, the periphery of these tribal habitats is transforming into linguistically least diverse due to the dominance of non-tribal languages like Hindi, Bengali, or Oriya. The growing presence of non-tribal linguistic groups led to linguistic situations such as bilingualism, multilingualism and language shift, ultimately reducing the linguistic diversity of an area. Holmes and Wilson (2022) pointed out that migrant minorities often shift to the host language, while migrant majorities retain their native languages because the dominant groups exhibit their language as the most prestigious language with high social and economic function, which results in the abandonment of native language among the minority groups. For instance, Chimbutane and Gonçalves (2023) emphasised the significance of language attitudes in the language shift from Bantu, a native African ethnic group, to Portuguese, a migrant group, among the urban and middle class in Mozambique; the Portuguese language is associated with 'positive' cultural values and attitudes, whereas the Bantu language of the Indigenous group is still associated with informal functions. This abandonment may not always be voluntary. It can also result

from policy intervention and government favouritism of the dominant language—for instance, Al-Khaza'leh (2023), in the study of the Rungus language in Malaysia, reveals that government policies hinder its preservation; no support of Malaysian educational policy, negative attitudes among speakers, and low status compared to Malay or English leading to a decline in intergenerational transfer. Language shifts at the community level can jeopardise a language's survival. For instance, Mesthrie *et al.* (2009) have found that specific American Indian languages and some aboriginal languages in Australia have experienced language death (no living speakers) as a result of language shift.

Considering the paucity of literature on the present research, this paper explores the impact of refugee resettlement on the redistribution of population on ethnic lines and the consequences of this process on language, particularly those spoken by the minority tribal groups of Tripura.

### **The study area**

Tripura is the third smallest hilly landlocked state in northeast India. A large part of Tripura is surrounded by the neighbouring country Bangladesh on three sides, with a natural barrier-free border length of 839 kilometres. It has a national boundary of only 162 km with Mizoram (109 km) and Assam (53 km) in the northeastern and eastern part of the state, respectively (Fig. 1). Before merging with the Indian Union in 1949, Tripura was a tribal dominated kingdom. Due to its long, porous international border with Bangladesh, Tripura witnessed an influx of Bengali speakers from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) post-independence, which trebled the population and reduced the proportion of the tribal population. Before the independence of

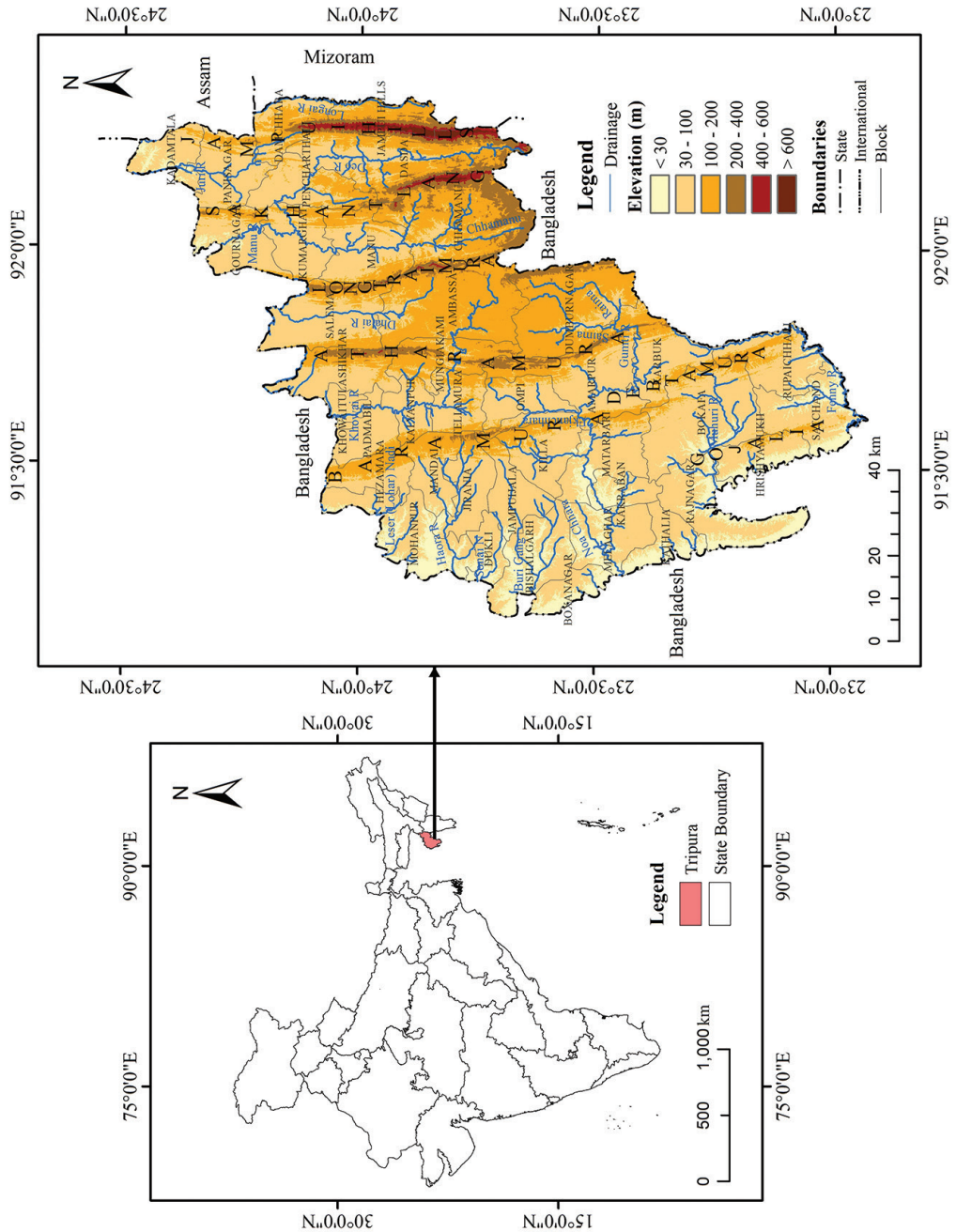


Fig.1: Location of Tripura

Source: Census of India, 2011; NATMO, DST, 1999; U.S. Geological Survey, 2014

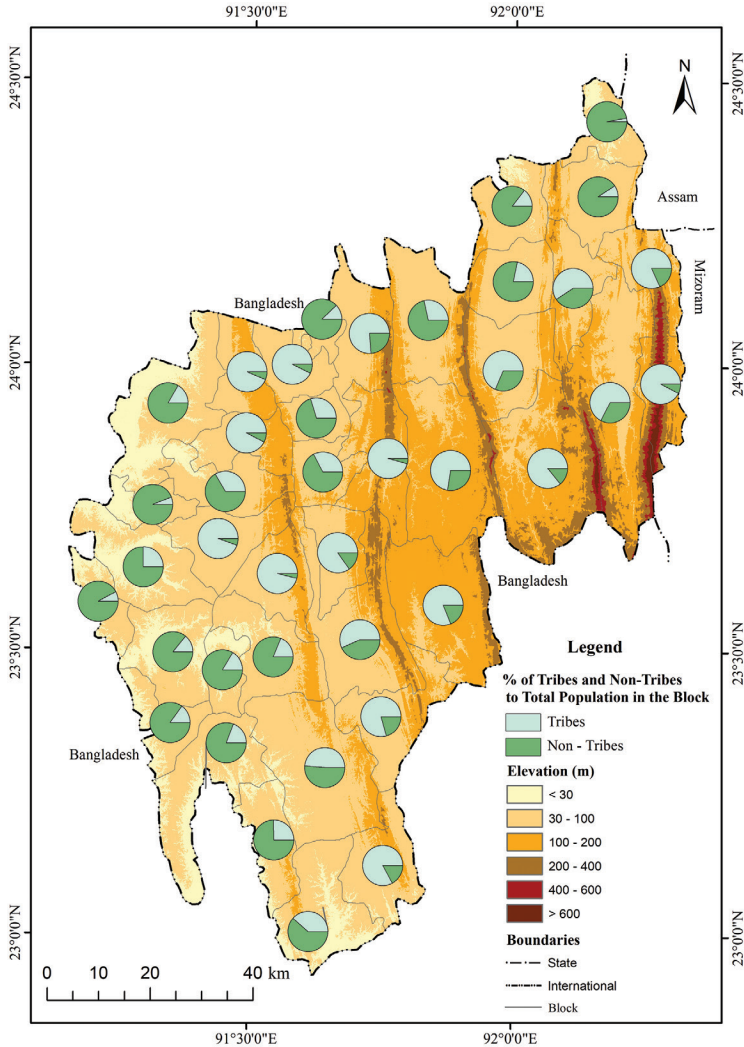


Fig. 2: Distribution of tribal and non-tribal population in Tripura, 2011

Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011; Extracted from U. S. Geological Survey, 2014

India, the tribes were a demographic majority (50.09%) in Tripura state in 1941 but were reduced to a minority (36.9%) within a decade by 1951. The process after Independence, in further decline in their proportion in the total population, continues unabated.

Presently, the tribes constituted only 31.8 percent of the population of Tripura in

2011. This has made Tripura a unique case of demographic metamorphosis, but not without its consequences on ethnic composition with its inevitable implications on linguistic composition. The process has engendered significant population redistribution along ethnic lines, resulting in reconfiguration of the spatial distribution of languages between

the indigenous tribal groups and the migrant Bengali. Tripura now represents a unique case where the language spoken by the migrant community constitutes a linguistic majority, rendering the languages spoken by the tribes into a minority status. As per the 2011 Census, 99 (including the 'Other' languages category) languages are spoken in Tripura. With 65.7 percent of speakers, Bengali is the dominant language in Tripura. Within the minorities, the Kokborok group of speakers, some 25 percent, comprise the largest and ranks second at the state level. The Kokborok speakers who identify themselves as Tripuri or Borok comprise nine tribal communities *viz.* Debbarma, Tripura, Noatia, Murasingh, Reang, Jamatia, Uchoi, Kolo and Rupini. The Directorate of Kokborok and other minority languages of Tripura identified only eight minority languages, namely Kokborok, Manipuri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Kuki-Mizo, Garo, Halam, Chakma and Mogh, which are mostly spoken by different tribal communities inhabiting the state. Although Kokborok is the dominant language among the minority tribes, it is an endangered, vulnerable language listed by UNESCO in 2010 (Blackburn & Opgenort, 2010). In the case of Tripura, out of the two official languages of Tripura, i.e. Bengali and Kokborok, the former language is widely used in the administration, educational institutes, courts, business, mass media, etc., subsequently leading to bilingualism, multilingualism, language loss and language shift among the minority language speakers, thereby exerting pressure on the sustainability of the minority languages. The linguistic diversity of Tripura is decreasing due to the dominance of a significant language, unleashing a process of language shift among

the minority language speakers. Kokborok and most other minority languages are restricted to India (Tripura, Mizoram, Assam) and Bangladesh (Chittagong hill tracts). Therefore, as Harmon (1996) puts it, these languages hold unique traits and adaptations to environmental conditions in parts of India and Bangladesh. Hence, the whole ecosystem and environment knowledge system will be lost. Preserving languages, especially minority languages, is crucial as they contain traditional ecological knowledge.

### **Data and method**

This study is based on the secondary data collected from the Census of India 2011, the table on population by mother tongue, and the primary census abstract.

This study adopted a descriptive research method to analyse and interpret the data meaningfully. The thematic mapping was done using computer-aided cartography in a geographical information system environment.

### ***Share***

The share of the tribes in the population refers to the proportion of the tribal people in the total population in a block. The share of the mother tongue speakers refers to their proportion in the total population in each block.

### ***Linguistic Diversity Index***

Linguistic diversity has been calculated using Greenberg's (1956) Monolingual Nonweighted method. According to Greenberg (1956), this measure is based on the probability that in an area, if two members of a population are chosen at random, then such two individuals speak the same language. In a population, if everyone speaks the same language, the probability that two such

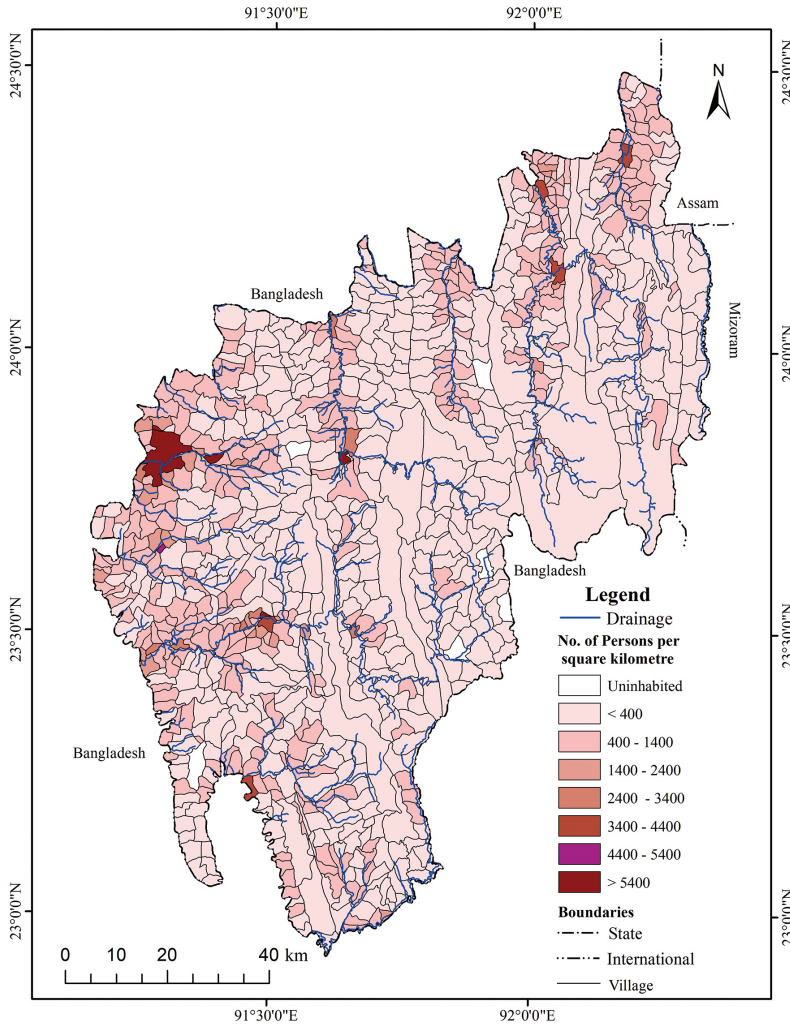


Fig. 3: Population density, 2011 superimposed with drainage system of Tripura  
 Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011; NATMO, DST, 1999

individuals speak the same language is 1 or certainty. If each individual speaks a different language, the probability is zero. Since it is a measure of diversity rather than uniformity, this measure may be subtracted from 1 so that the index will vary from 0 to 1, indicating the least diversity is 0 and the greatest diversity is 1. The formula is expressed as:

$$A = 1 - \sum_i (i^2)$$

where A is the diversity index, and i is the proportion of the population represented by those with a given language.

The linguistic diversity index appropriately reveals the impact of the dominance of one language on maintaining the diversity of other languages. The degree of language diversity for a particular area is not only related to the number of languages

Table 1: Flow of displaced persons from (erstwhile) East Pakistan to Tripura 1946-1971

Year	Person	Year	Person
1946	3,317	1957	57,700
1947	8,124	1958	3,600
1948	9,554	1964	1,00,340
1949	10,575	1965	13,073
1950	67,151	1966	1,654
1951	2,10,161	1967	12,299
1952	23,300	1968	N.R. ***
1953	80,000	1969	3120
1954	3,200	1970	4334
1955	4,700	1971	5774
1956	17,000	Total	6,38,976

Source: Vaghaiwalla (1953a); Vaghaiwalla (1953b); Bhattacharyya (1975b)

Note: N.R. \*\*\* Not Registered.

spoken but also to the proportion of speakers of different languages in the population, as the dominance of one language impacts the functional importance and vitality of other languages. As per this index, the number of languages having proportionately sizeable speakers are categorised as high linguistic diversity, and if one language enjoys absolute dominance despite the presence of multiple languages, it is categorised in the low linguistic diversity category. For example, if there are 10 languages in an area and one of the language groups has 90 percent of the speakers, it indicates low diversity. Conversely, if there are 5 languages, each with 20 percent of speakers, the diversity is indeed high. Although it is also not significant in terms of listing minor languages which are vulnerable and near extinction, this index is significant in giving out the picture of linguistic homogeneity or the impact of the dominance of one language on another minority language in a particular area.

### Spatial distribution of tribes and non-tribes

The spatial distribution of languages and language diversity in Tripura corresponds remarkably to the spatial patterns in the distribution of the tribal and the non-tribal components of the population. In general, the tribes of Tripura are heavily concentrated in the hills and uplands. In contrast, the non-tribal peasants have been attracted to the river valleys and plain areas (Fig. 2). The unmistakable correspondence between physical divisions with the culture reflects the social processes of peopling in Tripura. The settlements in the river plains are usually larger and distributed closer to the international border in contrast to those in the interior hills which are smaller with lower density of population (Fig. 3). The population of Tripura has been subjected to intense redistribution broadly corresponding to two phases. The first phase is characterised by the mass movement of the minority Hindu Bengali refugees from Muslim-dominated

East Bengal and later East Pakistan and finally, Bangladesh to Tripura, fearing persecution. This happened during 1946 to 1971 (Table 1). The refugees were mainly rehabilitated in the plain areas along the border, though with some exceptions, as some took place in the interior plains, too. These incursions brought about unprecedented changes to population density and the existing ethnic composition of the state's population. The spatial distribution of the ethnic groups too changed, with the tribal segment squeezing more and more into the interior hills and forests (Fig. 2). The second phase was marked by ethnic conflicts between the tribes and non-tribes during the 1980s and 1990s and continued up to 2000s that witnessed further redistribution along ethnic lines where the majority of the non-tribes moved to the urban areas. The darker shades in Figure 3 represent these urban areas. The tribes were further squeezed into the hilly areas (Fig. 2).

### **Linguistic regions**

The spatial distribution patterns of tribes and non-tribes form the basis of linguistic regions in Tripura (Fig. 2 & Fig. 4). The Bengali linguistic region corresponds to the riverine plains in the border areas. In contrast, the Kokborok linguistic region is in the lower hills, away from the highways of migration. The higher hills are home to several languages, mainly belonging to the tribes. Therefore, no single language can dominate these hills.

#### ***The Bengali linguistic regions***

The Bengali linguistic region lies in the river plains, where the non-tribes are heavily concentrated. They constitute around 92.5 percent of the non-tribes. Other important non-tribe languages in this region are Hindi,

Odia, Manipuri, and Bishnupuriya Manipuri. This region also has tribal languages like Kokborok, Halam, Garo, etc.; however, they do not enjoy absolute dominance. This linguistic region is confined to the river plains adjoining the Bangladesh border in Tripura's southern, western and northern parts (Fig. 4). The region is drained by major rivers of Tripura, such as the Juri, Manu, Khowai, Haora, Gomati, Muhuri, and Fenny, as well as their tributaries. They essentially lie in the west of the Baramura Debtamura hill ranges and the north of the Tripura hills and have elevations under 100 metres altitude (Fig. 1).

#### ***Kokborok linguistic region***

The Kokborok linguistic region lies adjacent to the Bengali linguistic region, mainly in the foothills of Baramura-Debtamura and Atharomura, with an exception in the Damchhara block in the Jampui hills where Tripuri, Reang and Rupini dialect speakers of the Kokborok language are concentrated (Fig. 4). This region is partly hilly and partly plain. The altitude ranges from 100 to 200m and the plain areas are of undulating relief with 30 to 100m elevation lying in between the hill ranges. These plains are table lands with flat crested upper parts (Fig. 1).

#### ***Mixed linguistic region***

In the mixed linguistic region, no single language enjoys the absolute majority. This linguistic region invariably corresponds to the hilly and forested tracts of Tripura in the higher hills of Tripura. It is a contiguous region distributed in the eastern and southern parts of the state with dominance of the tribes (Fig. 1 and Fig. 4). The languages Kokborok, Mogh, Halam, Garo, and Mizo spoken in this region majorly belong to the tribes along with the Bengali language of non-tribes.

Table 2: Block-wise linguistic diversity index of Tripura, 2011

Diversity index	Blocks
<0.35	Kadamtala, Panisagar, Pencharthal, Mungiakami, Padmabil, Hezamara, Mandai, Dukli, Jampuijala, Boxanagar, Melaghar, Kathalia, Kakraban, Matarbari
0.35-0.50	Damchhara, Gournagar, Kumarghat, Tulashikhor, Khowai, Kalyanpur, Mohanpur, Bishalgarh, Killa, Rajnagar, Hrishyamukh
>0.50	Jampui hills, Dasda, Chhamanu, Manu, Salema, Ambassa, Dumburnagar, Teliamura, Ompi, Amarpur, Karbuk, Bokafa, Rupaichhari, Satchand, Jirania

Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011

## Linguistic diversity

The redistribution of population in Tripura post-large-scale migration from east Pakistan changed the pattern of language distribution, creating a spatial dichotomy of the plains characterised by lower language diversity (mostly Bengali) and the hills exhibiting higher language diversity, maintained mostly a variety of tribal groups who have been traditionally practising shifting cultivation within the hilly areas and moving from place to place in response to the needs of *jhum* cycle.

Unlike the hills, the plains are subject to homogenising forces of urbanisation, large-scale centralised cultures, etc. The Bengali language dominates the urban areas in Tripura. The tribes speaking different languages in areas of their traditional habitat/concentration were affected by the process of language shift from their mother tongue if they migrated to the urban centres. Migration to urban areas often disintegrates language communities as the children have fewer chances to hear and use their parents' language(s) daily (Skutnabb-Kangas *et al.*, 2003). Brenzinger *et al.* (1991), in their study among small-language communities in Africa, found that language death is a likely consequence of migration to cities. Urban areas also serve as large-scale centralised cultural centres as all the

administrative, business, cultural centres, etc, are concentrated here. Hence, governments try their best to homogenise the language of the majority through educational institutions, mass media, administrative offices, etc. A similar situation is observed in Tripura, where the government uses the Bengali language for administrative, educational and commercial purposes. These homogenisation systems of the dominant languages expand at the expense of small-scale cultural systems. The outcome is reducing cultural diversity (including language) and biological diversity (Smith, 2001). Generally, the plains and hills have low and high language diversity patterns in Tripura, respectively. Some exceptions exist at the lower level, i.e., the blocks display diverse language diversity ranging from low to high.

### *Areas of low linguistic diversity*

The areas of low linguistic diversity are distributed in two linguistic regions: one is in the Bengali linguistic region, and the other is in the Kokborok linguistic region (Table 2; Fig. 4 & Fig. 5). The low linguistic diversity areas distributed in the Bengali linguistic region is invariably closer to the international border plains where the majority of the urban centres are distributed. On the other hand, the low linguistic diversity areas distributed in the Kokborok linguistic region are distributed

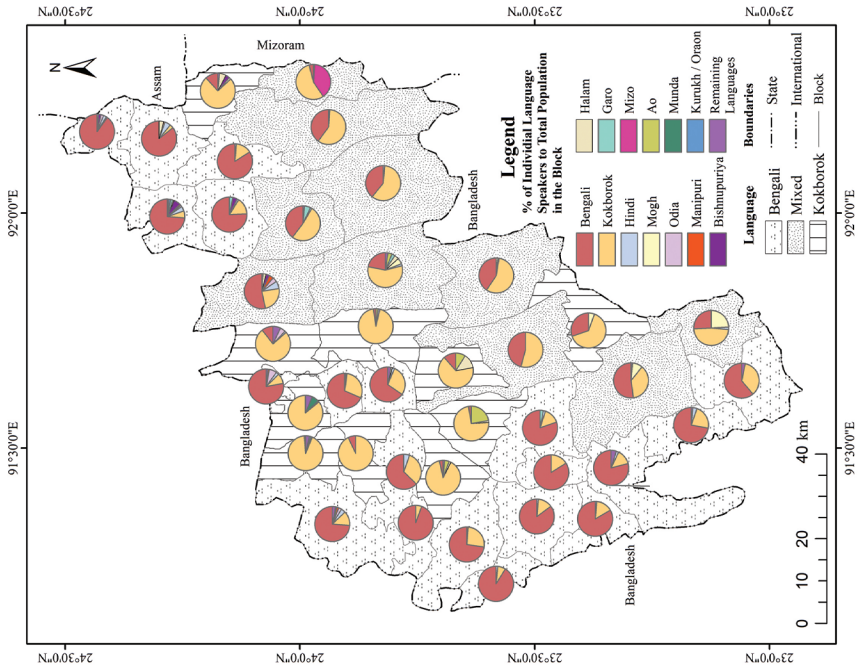


Fig. 4: Linguistic regions of Tripura, 2011  
 Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011.

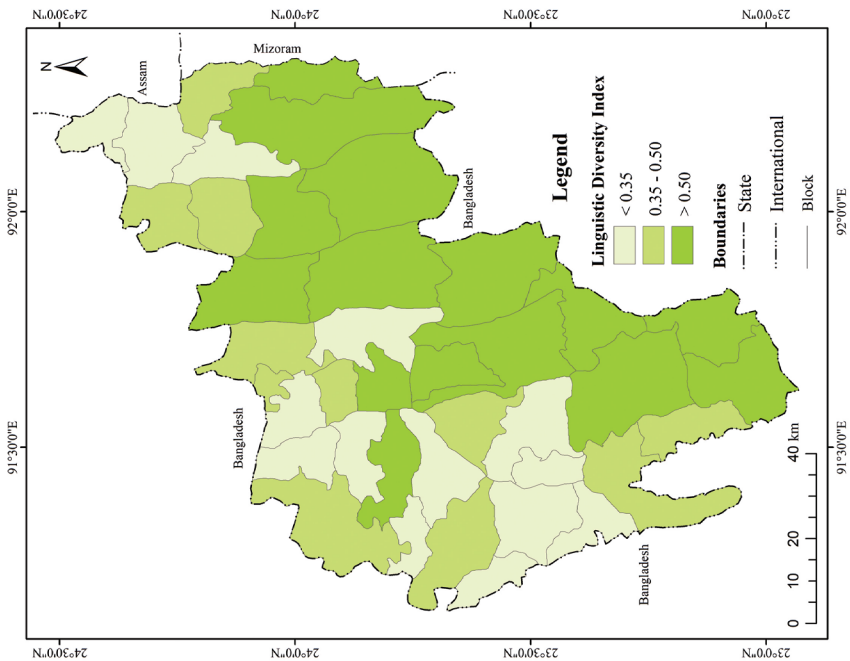


Fig. 5: Levels of linguistic diversity in Tripura, 2011  
 Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2011

in the lower hills, which are adjacent to the Bengali linguistic region. The patterns suggest that redistribution of Bengali speakers has occurred from the areas where they are minorities towards the areas where they are a majority. A similar process has also operated for Kokborok speakers, wherein the Kokborok speakers moved away from areas dominantly settled by the Bengali communities to those blocks that have dominantly Kokborok-speaking communities. The reasons for the redistribution of language groups can be attributed to ethnic conflicts that triggered such a change in spatial pattern of language distribution and ultimately lowered the language diversity.

### ***Areas of moderate linguistic diversity***

The blocks of moderate linguistic diversity are generally located in the adjoining areas of low and high linguistic diversity blocks distributed both in plains and hilly areas (Fig. 1 and Fig. 5). These areas are present both in the Bengali and Kokborok linguistic regions, but with significant presence of other languages like Halam, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Garo, Oriya, Hindi, Munda, Kurukh / Oraon (Table 2; Fig. 4).

### ***Areas of high linguistic diversity***

Unlike the low and medium linguistic diversity areas, the high language diversity regions are found in contiguous areas. They are ethnically mixed areas located in the mixed linguistic region where small tribal communities such as Mizo, Mogh, Kokborok, Halam and also Bengali speakers, each in almost equal share, are distributed. The majority of the high linguistic diversity areas lay in the parallel interior hill ranges *viz* Baramura, Debtamura, Atharomura, Longtraï and Sakhantlang and Jampui hills, primarily dominated by diverse

tribal communities. A single language does not dominate this region, and hence, this region has high linguistic diversity (Table 2; Fig. 1, Fig. 4 & Fig. 5)

It is important to mention that the pattern of language diversity is susceptible to change if the composition of dialects in a language changes. If dialects achieve the identity of language, then there will be more areas with high language diversity. For instance, the Census of India considers the Chakma language as part of the Bengali language. A similar case can be observed within the Kokborok language. Kokborok language itself has nine communities speaking the language with significant variation.

### **Conclusion**

Tripura projects a unique mosaic of languages. The state is a case of moderate linguistic diversity, with Bengali being the largest language followed by the Kokborok language spoken among the minorities. As the majority of the minority language belongs to the indigenous and tribal communities, their vulnerability is quite evident. The immigration of non-tribal language groups, especially Bengali, has significantly affected Tripura's language composition, situation, distribution and diversity patterns. The physical division of Tripura coincides with the cultural divisions. The tribes and non-tribes have near mutual exclusivity in the hills and plains. The peripheral plain areas adjoining the Bangladesh border have absolute dominance of the Bengali language, representing areas of low diversity. Language diversity is maintained in the tribal belts in interior hill areas where no single language dominates. Adequate measures must be

undertaken to protect and promote the tribes and their languages through widespread use as an instructional mode in schools and use in administration and digital or print media.

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### Competing interest

The corresponding author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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