

Multilingual Education

experiences from Chittagong
Hill Tracts, Bangladesh



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Teachers Training Manual Development Workshop at National Curriculum and Textbooks Board (NCTB)

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Introduction

Bangladesh is a culturally, ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse country. There are more than 55 Indigenous groups living in Bangladesh, with 3 million population, which makes up approximately 2 percent of the total population of the country. Though these groups identify themselves as 'Adivasi' or 'Indigenous Peoples', the terms 'ethnic minority', 'Adivasi', 'indigenous' and 'tribal' are used interchangeably in various documents and literature in Bangladesh.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) is a unique area in many respects from the rest of the country. The geographical terrain, environment, colourful culture and ethnic diversity, governance and administrative structures of the area form the characteristics of its own, which are dissimilar from the rest of the country. Due to decades-long political instability, the facilities of development in the region were limited. The CHTs region remained virtually isolated from the rest parts of the country and the inhabitants were deprived from the benefits of development. The historical CHTs Accord of 1997 has opened up the opportunities for developmental in the region.

After the CHTs Accord, the GO-NGO actors have taken various initiatives to intervene holistic development in this hilly region. Education in indigenous languages is one of the development interventions of the actors.

Indigenous Languages in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh the Indigenous peoples mainly live in the three hill districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the greater Chittagong, Cox's Bazaar, Barguna, Patuakhali, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Panchagarh, Bogura, Satkhira, Mymensingh, Netrakona, Tangail, Sherpur, Jamalpur, Gajipur, Rajbari, Cumilla, Chandpur, Sylhet, Habigonj and so on.

The indigenous languages of the country mainly belong to Astro-Asiatic, Sion-Tibetan, Dravidian and Indo-Aryan language families. The Austro-Asiatic include Khashi, Koda, Santali and War Jaintia, the Sino-Tibetan includes Koch, Garo, Tripura (Kokborok), Bawm, Khyang, Khumi, Lusai, Pankhua, Marma, Chak, Meitei (Manipuri), Mikir and Mro (Mru), the Dravidian includes Kurukh and Sauria Paharia, and the Indo-Aryan includes Chakma, Hajong, Bishnupriya, Oraon, Sadri and Tanchangya among others.

A considerable number of these indigenous languages are endangered, especially Dalu, Rai, Koch, Sen, Borman, Kurukh and Mushohor, Pangkho, Khumi, Sura, Chak and Malto, among others. Lahra — a language that is only spoken by 215 people in Joypurhat and Rajshahi, is identified as the most endangered language in Bangladesh. Koda is another language that is at huge risk — as of 2005, there were only 1300 speakers left in Rajshahi.

Languages of Indigenous Peoples in Government Strategies and Policies

According to the constitution of Bangladesh, ‘education’ is one of the basic components of livelihoods of its citizens (Article 15) and ‘education’ is universal and free and compulsory up to certain level (Article 17, a). The constitution also desires to relate education to the needs of society and produce properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs (Article 17, b). The constitution prohibits the State to discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institution (Article 28, 3). These spirits of the constitution guarantee the right to education of indigenous peoples as the citizens of country.

The CHTs accord 1997 has recognized the right to education of indigenous children in their own languages in pre-primary and primary levels, through the article 33(b)(2).

The Poverty Reduction Strategy has adapted a clause on the needs of education materials and other teaching-learning materials in the mother tongues of the Indigenous Peoples of the country.

The Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP) of Bangladesh aims to recruit community based teachers, organize training and orientation courses for teachers, introduce pre-primary schooling in Indigenous

languages, review curriculum and textbooks to enhance knowledge of indigenous cultures, improve infrastructure of the schools, provide stipends and other incentives, such as tiffin for students to overcome the difficulties faced by their situation and encourage them to enroll and retain them in school, and allow for flexibility to adjust school calendar according to local traditions, religion, and work, for use of supplementary reading materials in local languages and encourage use of local materials as teaching aids (MoPME, 2006:8-9).

The National Education Policy aims to promote and develop the languages and cultures of the indigenous and small ethnic groups, to facilitate learning in mother tongue of the indigenous peoples and small ethnic groups at the primary level of education. The policy promises to take special measures to ensure the availability of teachers from indigenous peoples and to prepare textbooks in their own languages. In these initiatives, especially in preparing textbooks, the policy recognizes the importance to include respective indigenous communities.

The sixth and seventh five year plan kept special options to ensure education of indigenous children in their mother tongue.



Advocacy with policy makers

Actors of Education in Indigenous Languages

Community-based Organizations

Language based organizations of Indigenous Peoples involved in education materials development are as follows-

Changma Academy
Chakma Language Council
Kokborok Research Institute
Marma Language Academy
Marma Language Council
Tanchangya Language Committee
Mro Language Committee
Bawm Language Committee
Chak Language Committee
Khumi Language Committee
Nangrima Garo Language Committee

National Networks

The leading national networks involved in the policy advocacy process including raising voices on policy matters are as follows-

Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Forum (BIPF)
Multilingual Education Forum (MLE Forum)
Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE)
National Coalition for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP)
Jatiya Adivasi Parishad (JAP).

Non-governmental Organizations

Indigenous Peoples' organizations involved in implementing the Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) are as follows-

Zabarang Kalyan Samity
Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Research and Development (CIPRAD)

Cultural Development Services (CDS)
Taungya
Gram Unnayan Sangstha (GRAUS)
Eco-Development
Balipara Nari Kalyan Sangstha (BNKS)
Mrochet
Toymu
Tribal Welfare Association
Mahale Adivasi Artho Samajik Unnayan Sangstha (MAASUS)
Santal Education Center
Strategic Action Society (SAS)
Ashika Manobik Unnayana Kendra

National and International Organizations

National and international organizations involved in implementing and supporting the implementation of MTB MLE activities are as follows-

Save the Children
United Nations Development Programme- Chittagong Hill Tracts
Development Facility (UNDP CHTDF)
UNICEF
Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO (BNCU)
Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM)
BRAC
Gana Sasthya Kendro
Manusher Jonno Foundation
Caritas Bangladesh
SIL Bangladesh

What is MTBMLE ?

MTB-MLE stands for Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education. It is such education that begins in the language that the learner knows and speaks most fluently, and then gradually introduces other languages like national (in our case Bangla) and international languages (in our case English).

MTBMLE : Initiatives of Zabarang

In 2006, Zabarang Kalyan Samity (ZKS), a local NGO in Khagrachhari, initiated a project called 'Shishur Khamatayan' (Children's Action Through Education) with the support of the Save the Children Alliance. The project promotes indigenous children's education by first developing a strong foundation in their own mother tongue. They then gradually learn the national language as they make the transition to the mainstream schools.

This approach allows children to progress well through the school, maintaining their own language, culture and identity but ultimately still gaining access to the official language. The students are taught entirely in their mother tongue in the first year. Then gradually enter into pre-reading, pre-writing and subsequently pre-maths activities. In the second year, children begin to read and write in their mother tongue and continue with oral mother tongue. In the second half of the year they also begin to learn oral Bangla- the national language.

As multilingual education is a new concept in Bangladesh, Zabarang started the process with community involvement, for which consultations and awareness-raising activities were carried out. Community leaders are involved in the entire activities. People initially had varying perceptions about multilingual education. One community leader that time opined, "...the concept of mother tongue based education is a great idea for the betterment of indigenous children's education, but it may take as long as fifty years to make this dream a reality".

After introduction of MTBMLE by the Government of Bangladesh in 2017, the Chairman of Khagrachhari Hill District Council Mr. Kongjari Chowdhury proudly declares, ‘we made it possible. The government of Bangladesh has considered our demands’.

Zabarang has introduced MTBMLE up to grade three. Teachers Training Manuals in Chakma, Marma and Kokborok (Tripura) have also been developed by this organization with the support of BNCU and technical guidance of NCTB and DPE.

Zabarang has implemented various projects on MTBMLE issues with the supports of UNDP CHTDF, BNCU and Manusher Jonno Foundation in addition to the Save the Children.



Introduction of Indigenous Languages in the Government Education System

In line with the National Education Policy 2010, the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) and the National Curriculum and Textbooks Board (NCTB) have started the implementation of MTBMLE under the guidance of the Ministry of Primary Education (MoPME) in 2012.

On 31 October of 2012, the first meeting was held presided over by acting Secretary of MoPME Mr. M M Niazuddin. Chakma, Marma, Garo, Santal, Tripura and Sadri languages were selected for the first batch of languages to introduce in primary schools. A committee under the leadership of Additional Secretary (Development) Mr. Said Ashraf Islam of MoPME has been formed incorporating the representatives of respective languages, representatives of relevant government and non-governmental organizations. This committee convened series of meeting and formed Technical Committee and writers panel for the development of education materials.

In 2017, the Indigenous Peoples of Bangladesh got teaching-learning materials in their mother tongue published and provided by the government for Chakma, Marma, Tripura (Kokborok), Sadri and garo for first time ever. The teaching learning materials for grade one, two and three were provided in the fields in 2018, 2019 and 2020 gradually.

As per the plan, the government will include Mro, Manipuri (Bishnupriya), Manupuri (Meitei), Tanchangya, Khasi and Bawm in the second batch, and Koch, Kurukh, Hajong, Rakhaing, Khumi and Khyang at the third batch, and in this process all other indigenous languages of the country will be brought under the coverage of government education system.

What More Needs to be Done ?

1. Establish an Indigenous Language Academy at national level to preserve and promote the indigenous languages of the country;
2. Establish a cell or department in the International Mother Language Institute (IMLI). Assign skilled and experienced indigenous scholars in the cell or department;
3. Include rest languages in education system gradually;
4. Allocate annual budget for teachers training in MTBMLE;
5. Recruit language specific teachers from indigenous communities;
6. Strengthen the Primary Teachers' Training Institutes in CHTs with necessary monetary, logistics and human resources;
7. Involve indigenous peoples in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals in the country;
8. Continue reviewing curriculum and teaching-learning materials development in indigenous languages;
9. Provide supports for research, advocacy and publications on indigenous languages and education in indigenous languages;
10. Introduce special subjects on indigenous language and culture in various Universities of Bangladesh.



Materials developed through a participatory process

AWARDS offered to Zabarang



Mr. Mathura Bikash Tripura, Executive Director of Zabarang Kalyan Samity has been awarded as National Awardee of the International Mother Language Award 2021 for his contribution in revitalization, preservation and promotion of indigenous languages in Bangladesh. February 21, 2021, Dhaka.



Zabarang Kalyan Samity has been awarded as for its contribution in Education and Research field in 2022. Rangamati. The award was offered by the Pro-Better Life (PBL) Bangladesh Limited.

How MTB-MLE contributes to **SDG4**



MTB-MLE enables children to read and write in their mother tongue and other languages as the education starts from the language that they know best (Targets 4.1, 4.4, 4.6)



Early childhood education of high quality is only possible in the child's first language (Targets 4.2, 4.5, 4.7)



Well trained and supported multilingual teachers boost learners' performances (Targets 4.1, 4.5, 4.c)



MTB-MLE enables life-long learning (Targets 4.2, 4.4)



MTB-MLE helps to address gender inequality by allowing girls and women to engage fully in their own learning (Targets 4.1, 4.3, 4.5, 4.6)



Respect for cultural and linguistic diversity leads to peace, social cohesion and sustainable development (Targets 4.5, 4.7)

SDG 4 Targets



4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes;



4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education;



4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university;



4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship;



4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations ;



4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy;



4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development;



4.c By 2030 , substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States;



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