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**Indigenous Languages:
Preservation and Revitalization: Articles 13, 14 and 16 of the
United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
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Indigenous Peoples of Bangladesh and Their Languages: Multilingual Education in Government Education System

Abstract:

Bangladesh is culturally, ethnically, religiously and linguistically diversified country although it is known as a monolingual country since its independence in 1971. Bangla is only national and official language as per the constitution of the country. Therefore multilingualism has not been recognized in the policies and programs before the signing of the widely praised Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord in 1997. There is a multilingual situation in Bangladesh beyond the monolingualism, which is recognized in the CHT accord 1997, Hill District Councils Acts (amendment) 1998, Unlocking the Potentialities (PRSP) 2006, Small Ethnic Groups' Cultural Institute Act 2009, National Education Policy 2010, the Fifth Five-Year Plan, the Sixth Five-Year Plan and Bangladesh Perspective Plan and so on. Most of the children from indigenous communities are disadvantaged by an education system that does not recognize the ground realities of indigenous peoples including their language, socio-economic, culture and values. For these reasons the majority of indigenous children quickly lose interest in school and leave. When they enter school they are taught in a language they do not know or understand. As a result the dropout rate for indigenous children in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is much higher than the estimated national rate with more than 60 percent of children dropping out especially in the early years (ADB, 2001). The demand of right education in own mother tongues of the indigenous peoples is one of the political of demands of the CHTs people. This right is recognized at the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord 1997 and the Hill District Council (amendment) Acts and other government policy and strategy documents of the government which have been formulated after the accord. This issue is also a crucial part of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and many other commitments of the member states of the United Nations. Following the commitment of policies, strategies and declarations, the government of Bangladesh has started initial works of implementation of a plan to introduce education in mother tongues of five major indigenous languages in the country. Since 2013, different committees have been formed to implement this plan and some important have been made through different high level meetings under the Ministry of Primary Education and its subordinate specialized institutions like the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) and the National Curriculum and Textbooks Board (NCTB) among others. Due to different realities in the policy making process, the decisions are still to be realized to translate in to reality.

1. Introduction

There are more than 45 indigenous groups living in Bangladesh (some research organizations opine the number of IPs may be almost 70 plus). The rich tapestry of Indigenous Peoples makes up approximately 2 percent of the population of the country. These groups identify themselves as ‘Adivasi’ or ‘indigenous’, but the terms ‘ethnic minority’, ‘Adivasi’, ‘indigenous’ and ‘tribal’ are used interchangeably within documents and literature published by the government. Historically, the Chittagong Hill Tracts is one of the most deprived regions in many aspects of economic, social, cultural and political rights. The evidences show that the indigenous peoples of CHTs have very limited access to basic human rights including the right to education.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts is a unique area in many respects from the rest of the country. The geographical terrain, environment, colorful 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. Decades of political unrest has inhibited the development of the area which remained virtually isolated from the rest of the country while the inhabitants were deprived from the benefit of development. The historical CHT Peace Accord of 1997 has opened up many avenues for developmental initiatives in the area.

One of the most difficult obstacles to educational access faced by the CHT indigenous children is that of language diversity. The CHT children, especially those living in the most remote locations, cannot speak or understand Bangla, yet, within the schools both the textbooks and the medium of instruction are in Bangla. As a result, their school performance is hampered in many ways: enrolment is reduced, attendance is irregular, the dropout rate is high, and achievement is extremely low. Under these conditions the natural mental growth and creativity of the children are also greatly constrained¹ (Durnnian, 2007)

In the CHT it is particularly important for learning to be relevant to the local context. Where this is not the case, experience has shown that parents do not value the learning at school, and the children themselves are unable to relate to the learning, and apply what they have learnt in to practice.

To cope with the difficulties in education in CHT, the GO-NGO actors have taken different initiatives. The National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction (PRSP) identifies the

¹ Mother Language First, Terry Durnnian, 2007

child right and quality education as the key issues in building strategies for accelerated poverty reduction.

The Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP II & III) aims to increase access to primary schools in accordance with the Government's EFA, Poverty Reduction Strategy, Millennium Development Goals and other policy commitments and improve the quality of student's learning and achievement outcomes, and decentralize the decision making process down to the school and upazila levels.

The most recent progress in the government initiative is the National Education Policy and initiatives for implementation of Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in primary schools. Despite this progress, still there are challenges in primary education in CHT, such as lack of or slow implementation of government rules, regulations, acts and policies; no accessibility to schools by the remote communities, absence of any initiative to bring the excluded children into education and so on.

2. Situation of Indigenous Languages in Bangladesh in brief

Officially Bangladesh is a monolingual country as the constitution recognizes Bangla as the only national and official language. However, this is the reality that apart from the Bangla speaking mainstream communities in Bangladesh, there are, as per the report of Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, more than 45 speech communities which comprise about 2% of the total population, approximately 3 million. Indigenous peoples mainly live in some specific pockets of the country including the three hill districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Chittagong, Cox's Bazaar, Barguna, Patuakhali, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Panchagarh, Bogra, Satkhira, Mymensingh, Netrakona, Tangail, Sherpur, Jamalpur, Gajipur, Rajbari, Comilla, Chandpur, Sylhet, Habigonj and so on. Then indigenous languages mainly belong to Astro-Asiatic, Sion-Tibetan, Dravidian and Indo-Aryan language families. The Austro-Asiatic including Khashi, Koda, Santali and War Jaintia, the Sino-Tibetan including Koch, Garo, Tripura (Kokborok), Bawm, Khyang, Khumi, Lusai, Pankhua, Marma, Chak, Meitei (Manipuri), Mikir and Mro (Mru), the Dravidian including Kurukh and Sauria Paharia, and the Indo-Aryan including Chakma, Hajong, Bishnupriya, Oraon, Sadri and Tanchangya among others. There are some specific pockets of indigenous peoples' localities- a) The Chittagong Hill Tracts region, b) The regions of Sylhet bordering on India, c) The regions of Mymensingh bordering on India, d) The regions of Chittagong bordering on Myanmar, and e) The regions of Rajshahi and Dinajpur region.

Language families of Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh: In Bangladesh indigenous peoples speak in four major language families. The language families are- Indic languages,

Tibeto-Burman languages, Austro-Asiatic languages and Dravidian languages. Details of the languages families are distributed as follows-

Indic languages	Tibeto-Burman languages	Austro-Asiatic languages	Dravidian languages
Assamese Bishnupriya Manipuri Chakma Hajong (originally a Tibeto-Burman language) Sadri (Oraon) Tanchangya	A'tong Chak Asho Bawm Garo Halam Haka Khumi Koch Kokborok (Tripura) Marma Megam Meitei Manipuri Mru Pangkhoa Rakhaing	Khasi Koda Mundari Pnar Santali War-Jaiantia	Kurukh Sauria Paharia

Location of Indigenous Languages in Bangladesh: The pockets of indigenous peoples inhabited areas in Bangladesh are as follows-

Location	Indigenous Communities		
Greater Mymensingh (Mymensingh, Tangail, Netrokona, Jamalpur, Sherpur)	Garo Hajong Koch	Barman Dalu Hodi	Banai Rajbangshi
Gazipur	Barman	Koch	Garo
Coastal Areas (Patuakhali, Barguna, Cox's Bazaar)	Rakhaing		
Greater Sylhet (Sunamganj, Moulvibazaar, Sylhet, Hobigonj)	Manipuri Khasi Garo	Hajong Patro Kharia	Santal Oraon Tripura
Chittagong Hill Tracts (Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari)	Assamese Chakma Marma Tripura Bawm	Lusai Tanchangya Mro Assam Gurkha	Pankhua Chak Khuma Santal Garo
South-West (Jessore, Satkhira, Khulna)	Bagdi (Buno)	Rajbangshi	Santal

North Bengal (Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Gaibandha, Nogaon, Bogra, Sirajgonj, Chapainawabgonj, Natore)	Santal Oraon Munda Malo Mahali Khondo	Bedia Bhumij Kole Turi Bhil Karmaker Mahato	Muriyar Musohor Pahan Paharia Rai Sing
Greater Chittagong (Chittagong, Cox's Bazaar)	Chakma	Marma	Kokborok (Tripura)
Greater Comilla (Chandpur, Comilla)	Kokborok (Tripura)		
Rajbari	Kokborok (Tripura)		
Faridpur	Kokborok (Tripura)		

Source: Bangladesh Adivasi Forum 2002, Durnian 2007, Bangladesh Tripura Kalyan Sangsad 2013

3. Recognition of Right to Education in Mother Tongue of the Indigenous Peoples in the 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 ambitions 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 somehow guarantee the right to education of indigenous peoples as the citizens of country. Although the article 9 of the constitution contradict to these spirits in some extents as it states the "*unity and solidarity of the Bangalee nation, which, deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh...*", where the existence of indigenous peoples is not recognized.

The plans and strategies especially formulated after the CHT accord 1997 have recognized the education of indigenous children in their own languages in pre-primary and primary level. The article 33(b)(2)² of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord 1997 has included a clause on 'Primary Education in Mother Tongues'.

² The Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord 1997.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy has adapted a clause on the needs of curriculum and teaching-learning materials in the mother tongues of the indigenous peoples and other ethnic minority people of the country.³

An especial plan under the second Primary Education Development Plan (PEDPII) called ‘Primary Education Situational Analysis, Strategies and Action Plan for Mainstreaming Tribal Children’ has been formed to take special attempts to address the special needs of the indigenous children of the country.⁴ In order to improve the situation of indigenous children’s education this special plan ambitions to recruit community based teachers, organize training and orientation courses for teachers, introduce pre-primary schooling with language education, review curriculum and textbooks to enhance knowledge of tribal 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). Following the continuation of the national education development program, the third education program (PEDP III) has kept a special provision called ‘Gender and Inclusive Education Action Plan’ (DPE 2011).⁵ Various specific plans are included in this planning document to execute education in indigenous languages of the country.

The National Education Policy aims to promote and develop the languages and cultures of the indigenous and small ethnic groups, to facilitate learning in the mother languages of the indigenous peoples and small ethnic groups at the primary level of education. It also ambitions to give special attention to create residential facilities in the schools of hilly and remote areas. The policy committed to take special measures to ensure the availability of teachers from ethnic groups and to prepare textbooks in their own languages so that the indigenous children can learn in their own indigenous languages. In these initiatives, especially in preparing textbooks, the policy recognizes the importance to include respective indigenous communities.⁶

There are some special clauses in the sixth five-year plan to ensure public services for the indigenous communities specially the women and children through ‘social safety-net’ program⁷.

³The National Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) 2005, page 152-53.

⁴The Primary Education Development Plan II (PEDP II); Directorate of Primary Education, MOPME 2006.

⁵The Third Education Program (PEDP III); Directorate of Primary Education, MOPME 2011.

⁶National Education Policy 2010, page 10, 12, 14 & 15.

⁷The sixth five-year plan, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2011-2015.

4. Initiatives of Indigenous Peoples to Introduce Education in their Mother Tongue

‘Right to education in mother tongue’ is one of the demands placed by the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in their political movement. Since the commencement of the political movement of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), the indigenous peoples’ regional political party in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, this demand is included in their political agenda. The Government of Bangladesh first recognizes this demand in the widely praised Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord signed in 1997. Based on this agreement, the right to education in mother tongue of indigenous peoples has then been included in the Rules, regulations, acts, strategies, policies, plans and other legal documents of the government.

After the signing of the CHT Accord, the indigenous peoples’ organizations of Bangladesh have started working on introducing education in their mother tongues. Indigenous Peoples’ specialized organizations on linguistic issues have mainly taken the lead in developing teaching-learning materials with the supports of various national and international expert organizations. The specialized organizations included but not limited to Changma Academy, Chakma Language Council, Kokborok Research Institute, Marma Language Academy, Tanchangya Language Committee, Mro Language Committee, Bawm Language Committee, Chak Language Committee, Khumi Language Committee and Nangrima Garo Language Committee.

There are some leading national networks who have been actively involved in the policy advocacy process including raising voices on policy matters. These types of networks include the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples’ Forum (BIPF), Multilingual Education Forum (MLE Forum), Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), National Coalition for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and Jatiya Adivasi Parishad (JAP).

Indigenous Peoples’ organizations involved in implementing the Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) include Zabarang Kalyan Samity, Centre for Indigenous Peoples’ Research and Development (CIPRAD), Community 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 and so on.

National and international organizations involved in implementing and supporting the implementation of MTB MLE activities include Save the Children, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF, UNESCO, Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), BRAC, Gana Sasthya Kendro, Manusher Jonno Foundation, Caritas Bangladesh, SIL Bangladesh and so on.

In 2006, Zabarang Kalyan Samity (ZKS), a local NGO in Khagrachari , initiated a project called 'Shishur Khamatayan' (Children's Action Through Education) with support of the Save the Children Alliance. The project aimed to ensure indigenous children receive a quality, inclusive education and participate in decision making that affects them, supported by national, regional and local policy and practice. The project was implemented in three sub-districts - Khagrachari Sadar, Panchari and Dighinala covering indigenous children, of whom 631 (50%) are girls. The government department of education and the local government authority were closely involved in this project.

The project promoted indigenous children's education by first developing a strong foundation in their own mother tongue, through the multilingual pre-primary centers. They then gradually learn the national language as they make the transition to the mainstream schools. This approach allowed children to progress well through the school, maintaining their own language, culture and identity but ultimately still gaining access to the official language.

The project introduced a two-year multilingual pre-primary program in target communities, with children enrolling at the age of four. The students were taught entirely in their mother tongue in the first year to build their confidence. Preparation for literacy through oral practices was introduced. Gradually students entered into pre-reading, pre-writing and subsequently pre-math activities. In the second year, children began to read and write in their mother tongue and continue with oral mother tongue. In the second half of the year they also began 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. We involved community leaders in all activities.

Zabarang involves and respects the leaders of each language community we work with. For the Chakma language development, Zabarang established working relations with the Changma Academy, an organization of Chakma language practitioners. For 'Kokborok' - the Tripura language - we involved the Bangladesh Tripura Kalyan Sangsad, a national organization of Tripura people. And for the activities relevant to the Marma language, Zabarang involved the Marma Unnayan Sangsad as well as a number of Buddhist monks who practice both reading and writing of Marma language regularly. Zabarang prepares the drafts of education materials, and then organizes community reviews, workshops and exhibitions. A broad cross-section of the community members reviews the materials and suggests changes and/or additions, e.g., decisions on the issues of spelling, standard uses of scripts, themes for the teaching-learning materials for multilingual pre-schooling, etc.

Community members oversee each level of activities. Each community has an entrusted with overall responsibility for the management and monitoring of the pre-primary centers. They also encourage parents to send their children to school regularly, oversee the construction of centers, appoint teachers and monitor their attendance, inform the parents about the monthly parents meeting, visit the centers at least three times a week, and maintain the building.

This initiative became one of the successful pioneering activities in implementing the mother tongue based multilingual education in Bangladesh. Government officials and policy makers from various ministries and directorates have visited the pilot initiatives undertaken by Zabarang to harvest the examples so that they can replicate those in to the national plans for MLE implementation. Taking the examples in to account the government has incorporated the provisions for MLE activities in its different strategies and policies. Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), Second Primary Education Development Program (PEDP II), National Education Policy are some of the government strategies, policies and programs which have incorporated provisions for the right to education in mother tongue of the Indigenous Peoples among others.

There are some other indigenous peoples' organizations involved in promoting the language and culture of the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh. Their activities included but not limited to policy research, policy advocacy, publishing literary publications in and on indigenous peoples' languages and cultural issues, organizing various cultural events and so on.

5. Introduction of Indigenous Languages in the Government Education System

To cope with one of the most crucial difficulties in education of indigenous children, various non-governmental organizations and community based organizations have started working on the mother tongue based multilingual education (MTBMLE) just after the CHT Accord 1997. National and international specialized organizations have come forward to provide technical supports to such initiatives. The organizations have started mobilizing communities, conducting action-researches, raising community awareness, advocacy among the political and governmental departments. The NGOs in cooperation with the community based organizations (CBOs) have also started operating learning centers within their own capacity to pilot the MTB-MLE. Within about one decade of time, the NGOs and CBOs have been able to show successes in their pilot rollout. In 2010, the government of Bangladesh has included considerable number clauses in its National Education Policy to create opportunities for the indigenous peoples to learn in their own mother tongues. In line with this policy document, the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) and the National Curriculum and Textbooks Board (NCTB) have started the implementation process of the ambitions of the government 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 to discuss about the implementation process of the MTBMLE in various indigenous languages of the country. Chakma, Marma, Garo, Santal, Tripura and Sadri languages were selected for the first batch of languages to introduce in primary schools. These languages were selected considering the population size. A committee under the leadership of Additional Secretary (Development) Mr. Said Ashraful Islam of MoPME has been formed incorporating the representatives of respective languages, representatives of relevant government and non-governmental organizations. This committee convened its first meeting on 3 December 2012 and took decisions to (i) formulate teaching-learning materials for pre-primary students at initial stage in indigenous languages and targeted age group will be 5 years; (ii) use own script for Chakma and Marma, Roman script for Garo and Tripura and Bangla for Sadri (activities Santali is postponed because of debate on script issues within their community); (iii) include representatives from some specific organizations like Integrated Community Development Project of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board, Save the Children, Oxfam and Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE); (iv) examine existing curriculum and teaching-learning materials, which are developed by different NGOs and CBOs to check their appropriateness so that necessary adjustments can be done.

Other progresses in the preparatory process to introduce education in indigenous languages in government education system include establishment of a committee for teachers' training, technical committee to provide supports in the entire process and selection of writers' pools to develop teaching-learning materials. The selected writers of each of the languages have already met several times have developed draft materials, which is now ready for logical analysis and publication.

According to the plan, the indigenous children were supposed to be provided with teaching-learning materials in January 2014. For the first batch the materials will be in Chakma, Marma, Garo, Kokborok (Tripura) and Sadri. Language in the second batch will be Mro, Manipuri (Bishnupriya), Manupuri (Meitei), Tanchangya, Khasi and Bawm, the third batch will include Koch, Kurukh, Hajong, Rakhaing, Khumi and Khyang, and in this process all other indigenous languages of the country will be brought under coverage of government education system. MLE Forum, a network of practitioners and NGOs active in MLE field is providing advisory supports and playing as a connector between the indigenous peoples and the government in the entire implementation process.

Despite these progresses, still there are challenges like slow implementation of the plans and programs. The government had first targeted January 2014 as the first milestone to introduce the education indigenous languages, but this plan did not see the light of sun. Then it was hoped that it will at least possible in January 2015, which is also missed. The final target was

January 2016 as the drafts of teaching-learning materials are ready in hands. A bridging plan was developed on 26-27 February 2014 under the leadership of NCTB and DPE. The writers' pools have developed teaching-learning materials through different participatory workshops held within March to July 2015. But the indigenous peoples are still waiting to see light of hope.

6. Concluding Remarks

Political commitment of the government and political parties to translate the strategy and programs into action is essential to ensure the right to education, including the provision of education in mother tongue for indigenous children. In order to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, there must be affirmative action by the State to bring all indigenous children into schools. Introduction of mother tongue based multilingual education, establishment of schools and lodging facilities for teachers and students in remote villages, nationalization of all schools established in indigenous peoples' territories and other relevant measures must be taken in order to achieve the goals of PEDPs, PRSP, vision 2021, Education for All (EFA) and eventually the Sustainable Development Goals. To advance the country, there is no alternative to inclusive development, where indigenous issues must be considered with due importance. To achieve the government's commitment to 'make primary education compulsory and available free to all', the government must ensure that all indigenous children receive education in their own mother tongue and within their own cultural environment. It is essential to revitalize and promote the indigenous languages and cultures in order to ensure survival of the cultural diversity of the country. Disappearing of a language means losing word stocks of that language which somehow affects to other neighboring languages. For this reason, the government of Bangladesh should have specific plans to promote the languages existed in the country.

7. Recommendations

- a) Ensure meaningful and effective participation indigenous peoples in all stages of policy making process. Engage appropriate indigenous representatives during the policy formulation, review and execution process;
- b) Ensure free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples for all development and conservation initiatives that affect them;
- c) Establish an specialized institute like 'Indigenous Language Academy' at national level to conduct research, lead language standardization, and publish literatures in indigenous languages;

- d) Formulate national language policy where the options of use and development of indigenous languages will also be included along with the national language Bangla. Special attention is required to preserve and revitalize the endangered indigenous languages including introducing such languages in education system;
- e) Ensure effective participation of indigenous peoples and their organizations and free, prior and informed consent during formulation of any laws, policies and programs that affect indigenous peoples and their areas;
- f) Keep specific budget provisions for indigenous peoples, their development, education in their languages and other relevant issues;
- g) Keep flexible options at the national rules and regulations to implement in the context of the Chittagong Hill Tracts;
- h) Ensure involvement of Hill District Councils, Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council and Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs in all aspects of activities that affect the Chittagong Hill Tracts region;
- i) Allocate sufficient budgets as regular basis for conducting researches and continue learning processes on indigenous languages and culture;
- j) Transfer full authority and resources for education delivery to the local government bodies like Hill District Councils;
- k) Strengthen local capacity for culturally relevant, livelihood-specific and participatory education which values the cultures and languages of indigenous peoples;
- l) Keep provisions of flexible delivery methods for all educational programs to ensure quality inclusive education for Indigenous Peoples.